

**“COUNT-OUR-SPACE”: EXAMINING THE COUNTERSPACES OF BLACK WOMEN
PURSUING THE DOCTORATE IN EDUCATION**

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Black women are earning more than 65% of the doctoral degrees awarded to Blacks, yet they remain dissatisfied and isolated in their programs (Shavers & Moore, 2014, p. 15). Research shows that Black women experience graduate school negatively on almost every level. While the literature suggests that the negative experiences of Black women continue to go unnoticed by faculty and administrators, they are taking control of their situations by developing counterspaces to ensure their successful completion of their programs. A counterspace is a “safe space that counters discrimination and builds a supportive campus climate for marginalized students” (Garcia, 2011, p. 11).

This qualitative study used Black Feminist Thought and Narrative Inquiry to understand how Black women experience graduate school and how those experiences promote the development of and participation in counterspaces. The study participants included four Black women enrolled in a doctoral program in the school of education at an institution located in the Northeast. All the women had prior graduate school experience, which was described as positive and supportive. They expected their doctoral experiences to be comparable to their prior graduate experiences; however, the women’s experiences were extremely different in the doctoral program. The study exposed a lack of proper advisement, mentoring, and same race faculty. As a

result, this investigation revealed that counterspace is an essential component to the successful completion of doctoral programs for Black women. It also revealed that the failure of formal institutional structures creates the need for counterspaces for Black women pursuing doctorates. This study exposed the importance of the following areas for promoting Black women's success in doctoral programs: advising and mentoring, faculty diversity, recognition of race and gender, and counterspace development.

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PREFACE

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To all the Black women who are considering pursuing a doctorate degree, go for it! The journey will stretch and challenge you, but it will also provide another Black woman with a dream to chase, because she will know through your example that it *is* possible.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The National Center on Education Statistics (2015) reported that Black women earned 15% of all master's degrees and 10% of all doctoral degrees awarded to women in 2013-2014, in comparison to White women who earned 67% of all master's degrees and 67% of all doctoral degrees awarded to women in the same year. Because Black women represent 18% of the population as reported by the United States Census Bureau (2013), it appears that Black women are not obtaining advanced degrees at a rate proportional to their representation in the population. These statistics suggest there are inequities in degree completion rates for Black women, especially at the doctoral level. In fact, the doctoral student attrition rate for all Black students (men and women) is 67% (Joseph, 2012), compared to a 50% attrition rate for doctoral students of all races (Lovitts, 2001). Although this provides an understanding of the attrition problem, data were not available for the attrition rates on Black women alone.

Literature, however, suggests that Black women are negatively experiencing graduate school, and these experiences are causing them to leave the academy without completing their degrees (Harris-Hanson, 2014; Joseph, 2012). Data suggests that while Black women are earning more than 65% of the doctoral degrees awarded to Blacks, they remain the "most dissatisfied and isolated students on campuses" (Shavers & Moore, 2014, p. 15). Although institutions have been required by federal legislation, via anti-discrimination laws such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, to grant Black women access to higher education, they have not been

required to examine how Black women experience graduate school. Access to higher education has become an illusion, with Black women being accepted and presented with a false expectation that they will have similar experiences and the same resources as their White counterparts. However, Black women in graduate school report feeling isolated, unsupported, unwelcomed, and discriminated against due to their race and gender (Harris-Hanson, 2014; Joseph, 2012). Prior to 1970 there was very little research on the experiences of specific groups, such as Black women, in graduate school because the number of Black women enrolled in graduate school was very minimal (Ellis, 2001). Since the mid-1990s, more research has been conducted on the experiences of Black women in graduate school, yet, there is still a gap in the literature on Black women in graduate school.

What is known about the experiences of Black women in graduate school indicates that Black women experience graduate school negatively on almost every level. Graduate school is comprised of many components such as coursework, independent research, and group projects. Within those components, students interact with faculty, peers, advisors, mentors, and other academic staff. Those interactions create and contribute to the student's experience in either a positive or negative manner. For example, Black women consistently report feeling misunderstood, and not received seriously by their advisors if the advisors are not Black women (Grant & Simmons, 2008). Black women also acknowledge the lack of adequate mentorship for Black women by Black women and, when mentored by others, also feel misunderstood and disconnected (Crawford et al., 2005; Griffiths, 2014; Patton & Harper, 2003). Social interactions within academic spaces also prove to be challenging for Black women, as they feel they are expected to be the experts on all things Black (Clay, 2012). In addition, they often have their academic ability, as well as their inherent right to be in the program, openly challenged by their

peers and faculty (Green, 2016). The most damaging experiences for Black women in graduate school focus on race, and experiences of direct and indirect racialized comments, as well as actions and behaviors (Clay, 2012; Griffiths, 2014). The recurring frequency of these negative experiences overshadow how Black women experience graduate school, and could be indicators of why they need counterspace to persist or fail to complete their program.

While the literature suggests that the negative experiences of Black women continue to go unnoticed by faculty and administrators, they are taking control of their situations by developing academic and non-academic counterspace to ensure successful completion of their programs. An academic counterspace has been defined by Garcia (2011) as a “safe space that counters discrimination and builds a supportive campus climate for marginalized students” (p. 11). A non-academic counterspace has not yet been empirically defined; however, examples of non-academic counterspace can include organizations such as churches, community organizations, book clubs, and exercise groups, which have been shown to be places where Black women find the sense of belonging they are missing in their graduate programs (Patton, 2009). Access to counterspace have been shown to have positive influences on the graduate school experience of marginalized groups, such as Black women (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Sule, 2008). Because many counterspace are informal, they often develop through personal networks. As the literature describes, Black women report these personal networks are their primary source of support (Patton et al., 2003). Non-academic counterspace may allow Black women to secure a sense of belonging and to feel supported and inspired, which may cultivate the encouragement they need to persist in their programs (Patton, 2009).

1.1 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to understand how Black women doctoral students experience graduate school, and how those experiences promote the development of, or participation in, academic and non-academic counterspace. Guided by a Black Feminist perspective, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do Black women experience graduate school?
2. What is the nature of academic counterspace for Black women, and how have they promoted their success in doctoral study?
3. What is the nature of non-academic counterspace for Black women, and how have they promoted their success in doctoral study?

1.2 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the positive experiences of Black women in graduate school and the nature of, and participation in, counterspace. The study is significant, because it is a way to honor those who have assisted every Black woman in completing her doctorate degree. The literature revealed many examples of negative experiences of Black women in graduate school. In fact, conducting the literature review on the positive experiences of Black women in graduate school produced many of the same articles as a search on the negative experiences. To uncover the positive experiences, I had to analyze the negatively-framed literature and scrutinize its contents to discover the counterspace. Lastly, this study sought to reframe the literature and present the positive experiences of Black women in

graduate school. This positive reframing of the literature has the potential to influence how institutions implement policy and practice.

Higher education mirrors the racialized and gendered hegemonic structures that exist within our society. Therefore, graduate school reflects the normative racist and sexist practices within society. While Black women are being admitted to doctoral studies in greater numbers, they continue to experience the process as outsiders (Hannon, Woodside, Pollard, & Roman, 2016). The United States Census Bureau (2013) reported that less than 2% of the United States population held a doctorate degree in 2010. Black women who enter doctoral studies hoping to become part of this elite group quickly discover that the treatment they receive outside of the academy is duplicated within. Although enrollment in doctoral programs has increased exponentially for Black women, attrition rates remain high. Additionally, their transition into faculty roles when they do complete their degrees remains scant (Bethea, 2005; Lovitts, 2001; Nettles & Millett, 2006). It is imperative that institutions of higher education take a closer look at their retention networks for Black women, as well as increase efforts to create experiences that are positive for Black women while in graduate school. Few formalized retention programs exist specifically for Black women in graduate school. The literature is replete with examples of retention networks for Blacks, but none are specifically directed toward Black women or address the issues of intersectionality. This study sought to address these gaps in the literature by discovering how counterspace influenced Black women's retention in graduate school.

The unwelcoming atmosphere Black women encounter has been noted as hostile, chilly, and isolated (Howard-Baptiste, 2014; Joseph, 2012). An inhospitable atmosphere in the academy could be a major contributing factor to attrition of Black women from graduate school. The absence of Black women from the graduate school pipeline results in the loss of a valuable

academic resource with a rich and diverse perspective, because Black women have been made to feel unwelcome and disrespected (Crawford et al., 2005; Joseph, 2012). The mixed signals the academy sends to Black women is that they will be accepted into the programs, but will not be provided with the support, resources, and respect to be successful. Understanding how Black women continue to persist in graduate school, even when confronted with a climate that is perceived as negative, is imperative for institutions to make appropriate changes in campus climate, and provide a friendlier atmosphere for all students, including Black women.

1.3 DEFINITION OF TERMS

AFRICAN-AMERICAN VS. BLACK. Race is a socially-constructed and socially-accepted category used to describe groups of people based on skin color, and to demonstrate the “superiority and dominance of one race over another” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002 p. 24). Sigelman, Tuch & Martin (2005) report that the term African-American gained popularity in the 1980s, after the endorsement of the term by many civil rights leaders. However, this term has been used interchangeably with the term Black and Negro to describe those who share brown or black skin. For this study, I use the term Black in place of the term African-American to recognize the complexities of this racial category, which is inclusive of people who do not identify as African American but do identify as Black (e.g., Afro-Latinos, Black immigrants from Africa or the Caribbean).

MINORITY VS. MINORITIZED. The term *minority* is a noun, and is defined as “a group in society distinguished from, and less dominant than, the more numerous majority and a racial, ethnic, religious, or social subdivision of a society that is subordinate to the dominant

group in political, financial, or social power without regard to the size of these groups” (Online Dictionary.com, 2017). Being considered a minority automatically minoritizes an individual and ascribes the connotation of “less-than” and inferior to that individual. The term is plagued with negative stereotypes and imagery (Solórzano et al., 2000). While both terms are flawed, for this study I use the term minoritized to demonstrate that Black women have been prejudicially *placed* into racialized and gendered groups, and within those groups discrimination continues.

ACADEMIC COUNTERSPACE. The term counterspace is defined by Garcia (2011) as “safe space that counters discrimination and builds a supportive campus climate for marginalized students” (p. 11). Academic counterspace were evaluated for this study and can be described as spaces embedded within the academic environment.

NON-ACADEMIC COUNTERSPACE. There is no formal definition for non-academic counterspace, but it can be thought of as support networks. They include and, are comparable to, mentors, guides, and other support networks located outside of the academic environment. For this study, there was no limitation on what was considered a non-academic counterspace, except that they were external to the academic environment.

1.4 STUDY DELIMITATIONS

This study sought to understand the experiences of Black women in graduate school, and how those experiences have contributed to the development of counterspace. This study contributes to the established field of Black Feminist Thought and extends the knowledge within the field. This study did not seek to evaluate how Black women are socialized. Although there is significant literature on socialization and how it influences an individual’s experience in graduate

school, this study did not examine this connection. Additionally, this study did not seek to identify how the experiences of Black women influence their graduate school identity development or their development as scholars. This study did not evaluate campus climate and its effect on the experiences of Black women. Campus climate is a broad topic and, while the study did address how academic and non-academic counterspace play a role in their experience, it did not focus on campus climate. Lastly, this study did not seek to prove or disprove a theory, but to examine the experiences of counterspace through the theoretical lens of Black Feminist Thought.

1.5 CHAPTER CONCLUSION

Black women are pursuing graduate degrees, specifically doctorate degrees, at an increased rate (Griffith, 2014). Yet, the research and representation of Black women's experiences in graduate school remains limited (Aryan & Guzman, 2010). The unique position Black women possess due to the intersection of their race and gender is important for higher education administrators and faculty to consider, as Black women experience graduate studies differently than other groups. Their experiences have the potential to shape and reframe how institutions approach graduate school education and programming. With this study, I sought to contribute to a better understanding of the development of counterspace for Black women in graduate school, which may enhance their long-term completion and career outcomes following graduate school.

2.0 BACKGROUND LITERATURE

The extant literature on the experiences of Black women in graduate school is limited, with much of the available literature focusing on their experiences as undergraduates (Alexander & Bodenhorn, 2015). Experiences for this discussion are used to collectively describe specific areas such as advising, mentoring, academic and professional opportunities; social interactions; racial and gendered microaggressions; and internal considerations such as self-doubt, self-censoring and isolation. Graduate schools have done an insufficient job in providing adequate resources for all students, including Black women, to safeguard them from encountering these negative experiences (Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vasquez, 2011; Joseph, 2012). Underrepresented groups, such as Black women, experience graduate school much differently than other groups. Yet institutions have an obligation to provide resources that are directed toward their specific needs (Hannon, Woodside, Pollard, & Roman, 2016; Joseph, 2012; Weidman et al., 2001).

The extant literature presents the experiences of Black women enrolled in graduate programs at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) as negative, and it is accurate that the obstacles and challenges Black women face in graduate school are plentiful (Bailey, 2009; Howard-Baptiste, 2014; Joseph, 2012; Patterson-Stephens, Lane & Vital, 2017; Robinson, 2013; Shavers & Moore, 2014). However, there is extensive literature that demonstrates that Black women are finding ways to be successful in the face of adversity. This Chapter examines the prevalent literature on the experiences of Black women in graduate school, or the dominating

literature, which presents the experiences of Black women as overwhelmingly negative. However, this Chapter also examines the more suppressed literature, which describes the positive experiences of Black women in graduate school. Finally, this Chapter provides an overview of Black Feminist Thought (BFT), the theoretical framework used as a lens to conduct the study.

2.1 NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES IN GRADUATE SCHOOL

The dominant literature regarding the experiences of Black women in graduate school presents much of their experience as negative (Bailey, 2009; Howard-Baptiste, 2014; Joseph, 2012; Robinson, 2013; Shavers & Moore, 2014). Those negative experiences are wide ranging and have far reaching implications (Howard-Baptiste, 2014; Shavers et al., 2014). They range from Black women's experience with advising, mentoring, academic and professional opportunities; difficulties navigating the academic landscape; interactions with peers and faculty; as well as racism and sexism (Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017). For Black women, graduate school is reported as chilly and unwelcoming (Howard-Baptiste, 2014; Shavers & Moore, 2014). These experiences influence how Black women perceive and value themselves and their sense of belonging, both within the graduate program and their institutions. Moreover, negative experiences can have a serious impact on persistence. Graduate school attrition remains at over 50% for all students, and 67% for Black students, which may be influenced by graduate school experience (Nettles & Millett, 2006). Overall, these negative experiences leave Black women with a sense of anger, mistrust, and frustration (Howard-Baptiste, 2014; Shavers et al., 2014). In this section, I discuss the dominant literature that outlines the negative experiences of Black women in graduate school.

2.1.1 Advising

Advising plays an important role in the successful completion of any degree, but it is of critical importance for the completion of an advanced graduate degree, such as a doctorate (Aryan et al., 2010; Ellis, 1992, 2001; Joseph, 2012; Moses, 1989). Advising is an essential part of the graduate school process, and the advisor should be thought of as the “face” of the program, or the liaison between the graduate student and the institutional structure. Ellis (2001) observed that Black women doctoral students who felt they had received high-quality advising reported feeling an increased connection with their programs, considered themselves on-track for degree completion, and were meeting or exceeding their degree requirements. Those who reported negative advising experiences reported feeling disconnected, were less productive, and lacked understanding on how to complete their degree (Aryan et al., 2010; Ellis, 1992, 2001; Joseph, 2012; Moses, 1989).

The shortage of Black women faculty advisor’s places Black women graduate students at a significant disadvantage (Ellis, 2001; Moses, 1989; Patton & Harper, 2003; Schwartz, Bower, Rice, & Washington, 2003; Thomas, Willis, & Davis, 2007). Literature suggests Black women prefer to be advised by other Black women, because they feel that only Black women can understand the unique issues they face due to the intersection of race and gender (Grant & Simmons, 2008; Moses, 1989; Schwartz et al., 2003). Black women report being more open with Black women advisors, and share limited information about themselves when advised by White men or women (Schwartz et al., 2003). The shortage of Black women faculty in the role of advisor creates a disconnection for Black women from their programs, departments and institutions (Aryan et al., 2010; Ellis, 2001; Moses, 1989; Shavers & Moore, 2014). While many other successful advising relationships exist, Black women have reported problematic

experiences when being advised by individuals who are not Black women (Patton et al., 2003; Patton, 2009; Schwartz et al., 2003; Thomas et al., 2007). These experiences include being misunderstood, perceived as overly aggressive, accused of not being serious scholars, receiving insufficient support, and experiencing a lack of confidence in their academic abilities by their advisor (Ellis, 2001; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Moses, 1989; Weidman, 2016). These experiences negatively contribute to Black women's graduate school experience, and set the stage for other negative experiences during enrollment.

It is important to understand that advisors play a critical role in student success. During graduate school, the advisor's role becomes increasingly important, as they are the primary point of contact for the graduate student, aiding in navigating the process and connecting them with resources. Black women, especially, need advisors who understand their unique experiences and special needs, and who can recommend appropriate resources. Due to the intersection of race and gender, Black women possess a unique perspective and often face situations and experiences that are distinct due to this intersectionality. Securing advisors that understand these nuances is critical for Black women, because they will be able to relate to them more closely and with greater understanding. Advisors will also be better equipped to provide them with appropriate resources that may assist them with concerns that are unique to them. Black women have needs that differ from White women, and require approaches that differ from current approaches.

2.1.2 Mentoring

Mentoring is not the same as advising. Mentoring relationships may develop out of an advisory capacity, but mentoring delves more deeply and is more intimate than advising. Mentoring has been defined as providing guidance, support, instruction, counsel, access to

networks, career development, and psychological development from one individual to another (Dixon-Reeves, 2001; Patton 2009; Thomas et al., 2007). Grant and Simmons (2008) assert that mentoring is also critical to the academic, social, professional, and emotional development of doctoral students, particularly for Black women.

Traditional mentoring models involve a person of higher rank or experience providing guidance, direction and support to an individual of lower rank or experience (Dixon et al., 2001). Within these mentoring relationships, whether formal or informal, a significant commitment of time and effort from both individuals is required to be successful (Brown, Davis, & McClendon, 1999; Thomas et al., 2007). Black women have reported that they benefit personally from mentoring experiences and receive emotional, spiritual and mental support. These anticipated levels of support make a substantial impact on the mentoring experience in relationships where there is a strong commitment from both themselves and their mentor (Grant et al., 2013). Black women cite providing access to professional and personal networks as vital to the mentoring experience (Grant et al., 2008; Moses, 1989). These networks are an invaluable resource for improving the experiences of Black women in graduate school, and in assisting them with the completion of their advanced degree requirements. Black women also report that their need for mentoring in graduate school increases as they progress through their programs (Ellis, 2001; Moses, 1989). However, as Black women enter the independent research phases of their graduate school programs, having a mentor to provide guidance, support and access to networks becomes increasingly critical to their ability to complete their programs (Grant et al., 2008; Moses, 1989;).

For Black women in graduate school, finding qualified mentors can be challenging. Black women report that when mentored by individuals who are not Black women they are

uncomfortable sharing, as they believe they will not be fully understood (Crawford et al., 2005; Patton et al., 2003; Patton, 2009; Thomas et al., 2007; Schwartz et al., 2003). Even when mentored by Black men, Black women still felt misunderstood and disconnected because of the lack of perspective in understanding what it is to be a Black woman (Patton, 2009). The lack of Black female representation in the ranks of faculty to provide mentorship is one of the key issues that influence the experiences of Black women in graduate school (Ellis, 2001; Moses, 1989; Patton et al., 2003; Schwartz, et al., 2003; Thomas et al., 2007). The lack of representation of Black women within the academy can also imply that the academy is not a place for Black women and, as a result, those who choose to enter may feel unwelcome and isolated.

2.1.3 Interactions within Academic Spaces

Black women in graduate school have reported social interactions as difficult. In academic spaces, such as the classroom, Black women have recounted that they felt as though they had to work harder to prove themselves as academically qualified to their peers and professors (Ellis, 2001; Hannon et al., 2016; Schwartz et al., 2003). Borum and Walker (2012) described this in their study of Black women pursuing doctoral degrees in math, wherein two of the women in the study reported that the White men did not believe that Black women could do math, particularly because they graduated from a Historically Black College or University (HBCU), even though they consistently proved they were capable of doctoral-level mathematics. These examples of negative interactions leave Black women feeling angry, resentful and, at times, unwilling to engage their peers and professors and, instead, seek other networks where they feel a greater sense of acceptance (Apugo, 2017; Gildersleeve et al., 2011, Hannon et al., 2016; Joseph, 2012). Additionally, Black women feel as though they are expected to be experts

on all things Black during classroom discussions (Bailey, 2009; Ellis, 2001; Moses, 1989; Robinson, 2013). During discussions on race or any component that is ethnic, professors look to them for input without knowing if their background and experience would lend itself to the discussion (Ellis, 2001; Moses, 1989; Robinson 2013). This is what Robinson (2013) considered the “*Spoketoken*,” a Black person who is the representative or spokesperson for the Black race.

These negative interactions with peers and faculty cause Black women to become silent in academic spaces, and to look for more comfortable spaces in which to freely express themselves (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Hannon et al., 2016). Black women report interactions with professors who are confrontational and openly challenge their academic abilities in the classroom, leaving them feeling embarrassed and belittled in front of their peers. Black women may not feel comfortable speaking up or confronting the professor for fear of negative repercussions, remaining quiet and suffering in silence when these situations occur (Coker, 2003).

The negative experiences of Black women with peers and faculty place further division between Black women and higher education, and cause Black women to seek culturally-safe spaces while enrolled. Black women often report their need to come together and create their own spaces where they can feel valued and understood (Ellis, 2001; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Hannon et al., 2016). Black women in doctoral programs, where the numbers of Black women are scarce, feel it is important to provide support to one another to help each other persist and ultimately graduate (Ellis, 2001).

2.1.4 Academic and Professional Opportunities

Part of the graduate school experience is the ability to become involved in academic and scholarly activities outside of the classroom. These activities include research, teaching, and publication, and are especially important to individuals enrolled in doctoral programs who desire to pursue a faculty career upon graduation (Weidman, et al., 2016). In addition, scholarship that speaks to the interests of a broad range of students is also an important part of graduate school (Gildersleeve et al., 2011). Learning the cultural and technical aspects of a discipline are important dynamics of graduate school (Gardner, 2008; Weidman et al., 2016). Upon graduation from a doctoral program, students are expected to have a comprehensive understanding of how to conduct research, report on the findings through publications, and have basic experience teaching at a collegiate level.

For graduate students remaining on the margins, such as Black women, the consequences of marginalization leave them with limited opportunity to participate in scholarly activities (Gildersleeve et al., 2011). Marginalized students, such as Black women, have reported inadequate and inequitable opportunities to participate in teaching, research and publications during their enrollment in graduate school (Gildersleeve, et al., 2011). Due to many of the factors already discussed, Black women are often overlooked by faculty and peers when academic and professional opportunities arise, and therefore miss critical developmental milestones, especially important to those who desire to become faculty after graduation (Weidman et al., 2016). This has been shown to stifle their future academic pursuits, reduce interest in participation in research with faculty and, at times, alter their intended career choices (Gildersleeve et al., 2011).

2.1.5 Self-doubt and Self-censoring

Black women also report negative feelings and low confidence levels as they relate to their academic ability (Borum et al., 2012; Coker, 2003; Gildersleeve et al., 2011). In addition, Black women describe being anxious about their ability to complete graduate level coursework (Coker, 2003; Gildersleeve et al., 2011). Having their academic worth challenged by other students and faculty invalidate Black women's sense of worth, which makes them feel like tokens on campus (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Robinson, 2013). Shavers and Moore (2014) investigated self-preservation strategies of Black women doctoral students, and found that the women developed an "academic mask" to shield themselves from sharing their full selves with those in their academic programs (p. 397). The women described instances when they had to present themselves as professional as possible, even when they did not know the answer or were unsure about themselves, to prevent negative assumptions about their academic ability being formed by peers and faculty (Shavers et al., 2014). The women in the study identified that their academic mask prevented them from asking for necessary help or to show vulnerability (Shavers et al., 2014). Even though these women were high achievers, they still felt as if they were not smart enough to have been admitted into graduate studies, that they were "faking it," and had to find ways to conceal their flaws (Coker, 2003; Schwartz et al., 2003).

2.1.6 Isolation

Another aspect of Black women's experience in graduate school is the feeling of isolation (Aryan et al., 2010; Bailey, 2009; Ellis, 2001; Harris-Hasan, 2014; Moses, 1989; Shavers et al., 2014). Throughout the literature, Black women report feeling disconnected from their peers,

faculty, departments and institutions. Black women are often forced to look for support systems and networks where they feel understood, supported and successful (Aryan et al., 2010; Ellis, 2001; Grant et al., 2013; Hannon et al., 2016; Patton, 2009; Robinson, 2013). Pursing a graduate degree can be stressful by its own merit, and adding these additional challenges further complicates the experience and can decrease retention (Bethea, 2005; Grant et al., 2013; Lovitts, 2001; Moses, 1989; Grant et al., 2013). Black women report feeling like outsiders within their departments and amongst their peers, and describe these feelings as being alone and detached (Aryan et al., 2010; Hannon et al., 2016; Joseph 2012; Shaver et al., 2014).

In addition to having to deal with the feeling of isolation within higher education, Black women also report feeling isolated within their families (Aryan et al., 2010). Many Black women are first-generation college graduates, and some families cannot relate to the challenges and obstacles they face while attending graduate school (Aryan et al., 2010). Also, being ridiculed by family for going to college and being “better than us” was one of the negative experiences Black women confronted because they attended college (Schwartz et al., 2003). These diverging feelings of loneliness, abandonment and isolation deeply impact Black women while in graduate school. Finding ways to cope while feeling isolated is a significant challenge and contributes to high attrition rates amongst Black women in graduate school.

2.1.7 Gendered Racial Microaggressions

Black women in graduate school have recalled many accounts regarding their experiences related to microaggressions (Borum et al., 2012; Coker, 2003; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Lewis et al., 2012; Moses, 1989; Sule 2009). Microaggressions can be intentional or unintentional and can intimidate, demean, and convey negative racial affronts and insults to the

recipient (Gildersleeve et al., 2011). Racial microaggressions are usually subtle incidents that can be verbal, non-verbal and/or visual (Lewis et al., 2012; Solórzano et al., 2000; Sue et al., 2007). Likewise, gendered racial microaggressions are considered instances of sexism and racism that happen because of the intersection of one's race and gender. This is also referred to as gendered racism (Essed, 1991).

The instances of gendered racial microaggressions experienced by Black women in graduate school manifest themselves in various capacities, and most people would not be able to readily identify them as macroaggressions due to their subtleness. Yet, those who have experienced any form of racial or gendered microaggressions describe them as a feeling that something wrong just happened to them, or that something just is not right (Gildersleeve et al., 2011). In addition, the perpetrator of the microaggressions may not be aware of how their discriminatory beliefs are being exhibited in their exchanges with minoritized individuals (Lewis et al., 2012). For example, Black women who have reported these experiences include being questioned about their level of ability or commitment academically, being selected last for group projects, being expected to speak for everything Black in racial discussion, and comments made toward acceptance into their programs (Gildersleeve et al., 2011).

Some projected stereotypes that Black women graduate students report include silence, marginalization, and beauty and style expectations, all of which are forms of gendered racial microaggressions described by Lewis, Mendelhall, Hartwood and Browne-Huntt (2016). These core areas also contained subthemes that demonstrate similarities found in other studies that focused only on racial microaggressions. These subthemes include the struggle for respect by peers and faculty, feelings of invisibility, being left out of group discussions or selected last for group projects, and consistently having to prove oneself (Lewis et al., 2016). However, the

specific subthemes that were exclusive to Black women graduate students, and therefore considered gendered racial microaggressions, were those related to projected stereotypes and expectations about beauty and style (Lewis et al., 2016). Those types of microaggressions came in the form of assumptions about Black women's attitudes and the expectation of the *Angry Black Woman*. Other gendered racial microaggressions noted were of Black women who presented themselves as too strong, aggressive, overly confident, and those who were viewed as a *Jezebel* (Lewis et al., 2016). Being exocitized and objectified by others who are "curious" about Black women's sexuality was a distinguishing gendered racial microaggression (Lewis et al., 2016). Finally, the expectations about what is considered beautiful, and identifying the hair, bodies, and style of Black women as the opposite of what society deems as beautiful, is something that Black women reported as they faced constant questions and inquiries about their bodies, especially natural hair and ample buttocks (Lewis et al., 2016). These occurrences, combined with the other types of microaggressions, characterize the gendered racial microaggressions experienced by Black women. They also create a sense of mistrust, and often result in women distancing themselves from their professors and peers (Alexander et al., 2015).

Experiences with gendered racism and microaggressions have the potential to shape how Black women view their graduate school environment, how they view themselves, and how these viewpoints can negatively influence their mental health (Torres, Driscoll, & Burrow, 2010). The pervasiveness of these negative experiences increases stress and requires the recipient to carry additional unnecessary emotional weight. Black women already deal with many other issues and negative experiences during graduate school, many of which may stem from racist or sexist views of those perpetrating the microaggressions.

2.2 POSITIVE EXPERIENCES IN GRADUATE SCHOOL

Many powerful and positive initiatives have been borne out of negative experiences, and the literature suggests that this is also true of Black women's experience in graduate school. Black women have had to find approaches to achieve a sense of belonging while in graduate school. These include creating counterspace within the academy and locating complementary spaces outside of the academy. In addition, Black women have had to exercise non-traditional strategies for mentorship, often seeking mentors outside of their institutions. Black women have cited other Black women graduate students as important constituents, and often they serve as primary advisors in place of faculty and staff within their departments. Finally, Black women have reported that their friends and family play critical roles in their persistence and success in graduate school.

2.2.1 Academic Counterspace

A counterspace is a "safe space that counters discrimination and builds a supportive campus climate for marginalized students" (Garcia, 2011, p. 11). Counterspace are safe spaces for individuals, such as Black women, because they provide a safe space for them to be themselves and connect with others in a more authentic manner (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). For Black women in graduate school, the literature suggests that they are "outsiders-within," meaning they present in larger mainstream spaces but do not share the same sense of acceptance as others (Collins, 1986). Counterspace provide a sense of extended family and culture for marginalized groups where they can practice their culture without being on display (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). According to Yosso et al., (2009) counterspace

“develop out of academic ones and vice versa” (p. 677). Counterspace is especially important for Black women because of the unique perspective they possess due to the intersection of their race and gender.

The current literature demonstrates that the needs of Black women have not been met by formal, traditional networks and programming, as campus climate is perceived as hostile (Aryan et al., 2010). Feelings of isolation within higher education drive Black women to pursue places where they can find a sense of connectedness (Lewis et al., 2012). Patton et al. (2003) cite the lack of Black women within the academy as a primary reason for the need to form and connect with counterspace.

Counterspace can be simply described as spaces or environments outside of the mainstream or formalized spaces within society or organizations. Solórzano and Villalpando (1998) describe academic counterspace as spaces that allow Black students to participate in supportive, nurturing academic environments where they can feel validated. Social counterspace provide a similar purpose, but allow those with similar frustrations to interact and become acquainted outside of the classroom (Solórzano et al., 2000). This term will be used to describe both academic and social spaces within higher education that facilitate survival for Black women in graduate school.

2.2.2 Non-Academic Counterspace

Organizations such as sororities, book clubs, exercise groups, and other community-based organizations have been credited with providing support to Black women while in graduate school (Lewis et al., 2012). Black women seek counterspace, such as churches, sororities, other community-based networks, as well as friends and family, to attain support and

encouragement due to the lack of support they receive in academic spaces (Agyepong, 2011; Lewis et al., 2012; Patton & Harper, 2003). Reliance on spirituality, prayer and meditation are central to Black women's ability to persist through the graduate school experience. Involvement in these networks is important for Black women, because they provide a place to remove the academic mask and reveal themselves (Shavers & Moore, 2014). The most common place Black women seek support is from their friends and family. Their friends and family also offer encouragement, emotional support and understanding not found in academic spaces (Alexander & Bodenhorn, 2015). The security and familiarity that friends and family provide to Black women is viewed as an invaluable asset, because it provides a significant level of trust and transparency for the women to share personal issues in confidence (Alexander et al., 2015; Lewis et al., 2012; Patton et al., 2003). These areas of support are classified as non-academic counterspace, because they provide a place for Black women to feel accepted, respected, and included outside of higher education. In the following section I discuss some examples of the non-academic counterspace Black women access as means of persistence in graduate school.

2.2.2.1 Non-Academic Mentors. Mentoring is a key component to the academic and professional development of all graduate students (Patton et al., 2013). For Black women, having a mentor is far more critical because they experience graduate school as negative, unwelcoming and chilly (Howard-Baptiste, 2014). The absence of Black women faculty creates several issues for Black women graduate students. First, Black women lack role models for which to pattern and model themselves as academics and scholars. Second, Black women are left feeling isolated within the academy with no one who fully understands the significance of being a Black academic woman. Finally, Black women are forced to find mentorship support because there are not enough Black female faculty members to provide mentorship to the

growing number of Black women enrolling in graduate school. While this may be viewed as a negative, many positive results have been developed as a result.

Black women have found many capable, supportive and outstanding mentors outside of the academy (Burke, 2016; Patton, 2009). Black women report that they have used their personal networks at work, church, sororities, and other community organizations to find mentors to support them during graduate school (Burke, 2016). Black women outside of the academy have consistently filled the role of mentor to Black women pursuing graduate school degrees. These mentoring relationships are often informal and occur organically. They have proven to provide the necessary support Black women need during graduate school, and have been reported as highly positive because of the connection the women feel having someone who understands what it means to be a Black woman.

While having another Black woman as a mentor is preferred, Black women have reported several positive experiences with mentors who are not Black women (Patton, 2009; Thomas, Willis, & Davis, 2007). Black women have reported having separate mentors for specific areas of their lives. For instance, some Black women prefer a White man as mentor regarding the navigation of the graduate school process, as they feel that the academy plays to the appeals of White men; therefore, they are best suited to provide mentorship for career development (Patton, 2009). Black women state that the combination of these relationships has contributed positively to their lives both as academics and individuals (Green, 2016). Black women, therefore, have demonstrated their ability to find the critical mentorship during graduate school outside of the formal network of the academy.

2.2.2.2 Peer Mentoring. Pitt (2016) describes a peer mentor as someone who “serves in the role of a mentor and protégé and tend to emerge from a like group where support is offered, technical

information shared, and feedback is given relative to career advancement” (p. 193). For Black women, peer mentors can be critical in their ability to navigate the complex landscape of the academy. Aiding with understanding the hidden curriculum and unspoken norms, peer mentors function as an additional layer of support, and often are the first line of defense for Black women finding their way (Patton et al., 2003). Finding relationships that are meaningful and have utility for Black women in the academy is important for Black women, as it helps them feel empowered and nourished (Pitt, 2016). It also helps Black women align themselves with other women to give and receive advice, and to feel a sense of connectedness (Patton, et al., 2003). These types of mentors are also known as *frientors* because of the unique dynamic between friend and mentor (Brown, Davis, & McClendon, 1999). According to Holmes et al (2007), peer-mentoring is a more democratic form of mentoring where “each person contributes to the growth and development of the other” (p.109). Peer mentoring allows each person to participate as both a teacher and student during the mentoring experience. This allows for a mutual sharing of knowledge which comes from each individual’s experience, perspective, and discipline. For Black women, finding peer mentors who can provide support and new perspectives based on their individual experience is important, because it helps to keep them connected and provides a sense of belonging (Patton et al., 2003; Pitt, 2016).

2.2.2.3 Friends and Family Support. Possessing an adequate support structure is important for all graduate students, but critically important for Black women because of the complicated and, often, negative experiences Black women face on college campuses (Shavers & Moore, 2014). Black women cite the support of their family and friends as key factors in their persistence through graduate school, and look to them frequently for encouragement to continue in their programs (Alexander et al., 2005; Shavers et al., 2014; Tillman, 2012). In fact, Black women list

their family and friends as their pillars of strength, empowerment and encouragement, especially during times when they felt inadequate and emotionally drained (Alexander et al., 2005; Shavers et al., 2014; Tillman, 2012). The ability to lean on their family and friends as an outlet allows them to express their true feelings in a safe space and be re-charged, enabling them to return to their studies (Alexander et al., 2015). Having family support is a vital component of the Black women's ability to persist through graduate school, especially on campuses such as PWIs, where the climate can be regarded as hostile (Shavers et al., 2014).

2.3 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Black Feminist Thought (BFT) allows Black women to use their own voice to give meaning to their experiences (Collins, 1989). It allows them a place and space in which they can define themselves, and resist the negative mainstream narratives and the corresponding images presented (Collins, 1989). BFT allows them to replace those negative images with their own descriptions and imageries of themselves.

BFT specializes and focuses on formulating and expressing the distinct and self-defined perspective of Black women (Collins, 1989). It ultimately seeks to provide insight and understanding for the broader society on the interpretation of the life experiences of Black women. BFT is framed by one central idea: Black feminist ideas originate from, and are generated by, Black women, which is comprised of three themes: 1) others may research and document black feminist thoughts, but they cannot produce Black Feminist Thought, 2) Black women share a common and unique perspective that can be shared among Black women, and 3)

the intersectionality of class, religion, age, and sexual orientation provides for many diverse representations of these commonalities (Collins, 1986, 1989, 2000; Patton, 2009).

Black Feminist Thought maintains that in the dominant culture Black women are negatively stereotyped to dehumanize and control Black women (Collins, 1986). The process of self-definition and self-valuation is extremely important in identity creation for Black women, and how Black women will create meaning from their experiences. Closely related to the creation of identity through self-definition is the idea of Black female culture. BFT seeks to establish avenues through which Black women create, define, and promote their own culture. Because the experiences of Black women are unique and distinct, understanding Black female culture is important for understanding how Black women create meaning from their experiences.

The aims of this study were well aligned with the purpose of BFT, because the study sought to understand the graduate school experiences of Black women, and how their involvement in counterspace promote their success in doctoral study. The study also created additional Black Feminist Thought, as the women who participated shared their experiences and provided their own self-defined perspective on their graduate school experiences. BFT challenges Black female scholars to contribute to Black feminist thinking through dissemination of “specialized knowledge.” In this way, they confront the stereotypical images related to Black women which perpetuate and normalize gendered racism toward Black women (Collins, 2000).

BFT was used in the study as a conceptual framework, which Maxwell defines as “the actual ideas and beliefs that you hold about the phenomena studied, whether these are written down or not; this may also be called the ‘theoretical framework’ or ‘idea context’ for the study” (p. 39.) This study was guided by BFT, which asserts that multiple realities exist and are constructed based on the lived experiences of the individual. BFT is a theory that has been

broadly applied to research on Black women. Black women are members of a uniquely positioned, minoritized group who face dual oppressions of race and gender. The intersection of racialized and gendered oppression influences their experiences, including how they experience graduate school. For that reason, it was important to apply a conceptual framework that took into consideration the unique standpoint of Black woman. The study sought to examine the experiences of Black women in graduate school, and how those experiences influenced the development and participation in counterspace. BFT is the foundational theory that was used to support this research study. The epistemological perspectives of BFT are discussed in more detail in the methodology chapter. There, I explain how I drew from BFT to guide the methods and the entire research process, including critical theoretical concepts I use from BFT. Here, I provide an overview of the core tenets of BFT, and how I used them to conduct research on Black women in graduate school.

2.3.1 Black Feminist Thought

Patricia Collins is one of the scholars credited with formalizing BFT as a theory, and as an extension of Black Feminism. Collins (2006) describes BFT as a mechanism in which Black women use their own voices to give meaning to their experiences, define themselves, and resist the negative mainstream narratives and images presented concerning them. BFT allows them to replace these negative narratives and images with their own descriptions of who and what they are. Deciding to define themselves as beautiful women through the wearing of natural hair is an example. BFT specializes and focuses on formulating and expressing the distinct and self-defined perspective of Black women (Collins, 1986). It also seeks to provide insight and understanding for the broader society, and the interpretations of life experiences of Black women

in their own voice, as they create meaning. BFT is framed by one central idea: Black feminist ideas originate from, and are generated by, Black women. That central idea is supported by three themes: 1) others may research and document Black feminist thoughts but they cannot produce black feminist thought, 2) Black women share a common and unique perspective that can be shared amongst Black women, and 3) the intersectionality of class, religion, age, and sexual orientation provides for many diverse representations of these commonalities.

These three major themes are supported by five underlying tenets. The first underlying tenet is defined by Collins (2000) to “resist oppression and the ideas, and practices that support it” (p. 22). It is essentially a tool Black woman can utilize in order to empower themselves and others. BFT provides Black women with a voice and a way to challenge the U.S. mainstream narrative that declares everyone is equal and should be treated as such. Black women’s experiences speak to a different narrative, and BFT allows them to express their experiences in their own words.

Secondly, BFT is vital because not all Black women have identical experiences even though they may share the same race and gender. The intersection of class, religion and sexual orientation create unique and individualized experiences for each Black woman (Collins, 2000). While, collectively, Black women may identify with a standpoint, their individual experiences create divergent understandings as Black female individuals. It has been incorrectly assumed that being a Black woman is the same as being a woman, and that being a Black woman is equivalent to being Black (King, 1988). BFT aims to communicate both these divergent experiences, as well as the “collective” standpoint that Black women face because of repeated demonstrations of mistreatment (Collins, 2000). BFT provides a conduit for researchers to examine the experiences of Black women through this well-established Theory.

The third underlying tenet of BFT defined by Collins (2000) is that “knowledge for knowledge’s sake is not enough; Black feminist thought must both be tied to Black women’s lived experiences and aim to better those experiences in some fashion” (p. 31). Activism is the intended outcome of BFT. Using the collective standpoint of Black women, and transforming those standpoints into action, are key objectives for BFT. This study seeks to understand what collective standpoint Black women share as it relates to participation in counterspace. Collins (2000) uses the term “rearticulating” to describe how Black women use the knowledge they have gained to advance a different view of the Black woman to the world and to ourselves. As Black women create identity within the dominant society, they need to choose whether to accept or deny the normative identities that are prescribed to them by the prevailing culture, or to challenge those images and create counter-images for themselves. BFT argues that in the dominant culture Black women are negatively stereotyped in an effort to dehumanize and control Black women (Collins, 1986). The process of self-definition and self-valuation is extremely important for identity creation and rearticulation.

Closely related to the creation of identity through self-definition and self-valuation is the idea of black female culture. BFT seeks to establish ways through which Black women create, define and promote their own culture. Because the experiences of Black women are unique and distinct, understanding that culture is key to understanding how Black women create meaning from their experiences and how they operate within the larger context. Black women have absorbed multiple identities to survive within society. They create a dual consciousness and absorb identities, or what Winkle-Wagner (2009) defines as the “unchosen me.” Because Winkle-Wagner is a White woman, she did not create new BFT; however, she added additional BFT to the larger conversation through the voices of the Black women she studied. This is

important because as BFT expands and knowledge spreads, it has a stronger ability to arm Black women with further knowledge they can use and preserve through graduate school.

The fourth tenet of BFT requires Black women scholars to play a vital role in advancing BFT. As BFT is produced by Black women, dissemination of BFT is a necessity for Black women scholars. Black women scholars understand the collective standpoint of Black women, and can relate to the position and conditions Black women encounter. Black women within the academy have a unique opportunity to combine scholarship and activism to impact social justice and to further BFT (Collins, 2000). As stated previously, self-definition and self-valuation is important in the furtherance of BFT, because it allows Black women to define their own reality for themselves as the individuals who have lived the experience (Collins, 2000). As scholars, Black women can extend the dialogue regarding the experiences of Black women through their scholarship, teaching and service. Through these activities, Black women scholars come to better know and understand themselves through their achievements. This understanding is shared and creates empowerment (Collins, 2000). Because BFT is essential for Black women scholars, it is ultimately an act of survival for these individuals. Black women scholars use their position within the academy to advocate on behalf of other Black women. They are less likely to abandon the work because the struggle of the Black women is their own struggle as well (Collins, 2000). It is important to note, however, that a Black woman does not have to be a scholar to create and promote BFT.

Finally, BFT expects that as society changes, and social justice agendas expand, the work to affect change must also advance. We live within an evolving and dynamic society that continues to progress in some areas while others remain stagnant. The role of BFT, too, must change as the world around us evolves. It is important for Black women to continue to develop

their identities within these new contexts and the underlying tenets of BFT discussed above, providing them the scaffolding by which to do so. Throughout history, oppression has affected many different groups. King (1988) argues that it is essential that Black women “address all oppressions” because our freedom is tied to the freedom of all (p. 43). As Black women, we cannot afford to oppose anyone the way we have been opposed, and must stand in solidarity with all humanity (Collins, 2000). The agenda of Black women is connected to every other social justice project and, through our own pursuit of empowerment, we empower others (Collins, 2000). As researchers Jones, Wilder and Osborne-Lampkin (2013) have explained, it is important to listen for the “true and real experiences of Black womanhood with the Black woman at the center of analysis” (p. 330).

Identifying a theoretical framework that can appropriately support research addressing the unique challenges Black women face in higher education can be difficult. Scholars have discovered that most feminist theories fail to address the intersecting facets of the lives of Black women (Collins 2000). Because understanding the experiences of Black women to obtain their collective standpoint is central to BFT, many scholars who conduct research on Black women choose BFT as their theoretical framework. Scholars who use BFT as a theoretical framework in their research do so with the primary objective of contributing to scholarship and action about Black women’s collective standpoint (Collins, 2000).

2.4 APPLICATION OF BFT IN THE STUDY

Various theoretical frameworks have been used to conduct research with Black women in graduate school; however, the two most popular frameworks being used more recently are

Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Black Feminist Thought (BFT). By and large, BFT has been used in higher education research more as an epistemological justification than as a conceptual framework. A conceptual framework is defined by Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) as:

drawing from the theory, research, and experience, and examines the relationship among constructs and ideas. As such, it is the structure or heuristic that guides your research. In essence, the conceptual framework provides the theoretical and methodological basis for development of the study and analysis of the findings. (p. 10)

An epistemological justification can be described as a way to justify what can be known or counted as knowledge, as it relates to the researcher and what is being researched (Creswell, 2013). In short, an epistemological justification is a way of saying this knowledge is real and valuable and provides a theory, such as BFT, to support its legitimacy. For this study, BFT was used as a conceptual framework, because the study aimed to understand the relationship between the participants' experience and their involvement in counterspace, two intersecting constructs amongst women who may have varying experiences.

Research implies that Black women's experiences in graduate school are heavily influenced by the intersection of their race and gender. That intersectionality is not well understood or considered in the development of academic programming, such as advising or in providing students with experiences that contemplate their intersectionality to demonstrate an understanding of the specific needs intersectionality create. The use of BFT to understand intersectionality is important because it provides a framework to understand the collective standpoint of Black women; how they make meaning of their experiences; and how they use that understanding to define themselves, resist oppression, and become their own advocates and activists. BFT has been broadly used to research the experiences of Black women in higher

education; however, use of BFT to examine the experiences of Black women in graduate school specifically is limited. For this study, BFT was an appropriate conceptual framework to further investigate Black women's racialized and gendered experiences, and to expand the Theory itself as a means to disrupt the dominant patriarchal White mainstream paradigm.

2.5 CHAPTER CONCLUSION

The literature presents the experiences of Black women in graduate school as replete with negative experiences. However, it is also overflowing with positive examples and illustrations of Black women in graduate school. Those positive examples include involvement in academic and non-academic counterspace. The objective of this study is to expand the availability of positive literature regarding the experiences of Black women in graduate school, and to use BFT as a framework for appreciating its power, meaning, and value for Black women. Further research is necessary to understand how Black women experience graduate school and how academic and non-academic counterspace support Black women and help them to complete graduate school. This study is intended to address these gaps.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study used Narrative Inquiry, which can be used to describe *phenomena* studied or as a “*method*” to analyze stories that are revealed (Creswell, 2013). Originally used to conduct studies within the disciplines of literature, history, anthropology, sociology and education, Narrative Inquiry has been adopted by other disciplines throughout the years (Creswell, 2013). Narrative Inquiry is a qualitative research method focused on exploring the lives of individuals which tells a “story” about the individual’s life experiences (Creswell, 2009).

I conducted this study using Narrative Inquiry to understand the experiences of Black women pursuing the doctorate. Moreover, Narrative Inquiry was used to gain insight on how the experiences of Black women in graduate school contribute to the development of, and participation in, counterspace. Narrative Inquiry was an appropriate method for this study because it aligns well with the theoretical framework of Black Feminist Thought, which provides Black women ways to voice their own stories. Black women experience graduate school differently from all other groups (Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). Their atypical experiences result in the development of informal counterspace that aid in their persistence to degree attainment. The use of Narrative Inquiry allowed me to gain first-hand knowledge into the lives and experiences of the women in the study, by allowing them to reconstruct their stories in their own voice.

Due to the way, Black women experience graduate school, the stories they tell about their experience will be vastly different than others. The prominent literature presents their experience as predominantly negative, and fails to adequately highlight the positive ways in which Black women discover encouraging spaces and networks that influence their trajectory in graduate school. The purpose of this study was to explore the positive experiences of Black women in graduate school by examining academic counterspace development, and participation in non-academic counterspace that aid in their persistence. Guided by BFT, which accounts for unique perspective Black women possess due to the intersection of their race and gender, this study sought to understand the experiences of Black women from their own perspective (Collins, 2006). BFT also provides Black women with a way to define themselves, and to present a counter-narrative to oppose the negative stereotypes and imagery that is presented about them in research. Narrative Inquiry was an appropriate methodology for this study because its primary aim was to allow participants to reconstruct their stories using their own voice (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Combined with BFT, Narrative Inquiry provided an opportunity to examine the counter-narratives presented by Black women in graduate school and present another perspective. Thus, this Chapter presents the methodology used to conduct this study. It also provides an overview of the setting, recruitment strategy, sampling, and data analysis utilized during the study. Lastly, this Chapter presents information about my epistemology, reflexivity and limitations of the study.

3.1 NARRATIVE INQUIRY

Narrative Inquiry is a qualitative research method that focuses on exploring the lives of individuals, to tell a “story” about the individual’s life experiences (Creswell, 2009). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) assert that humans are storytelling beings who individually and collectively live storied lives. Researchers examine those storied lives through various data collection methods to better understand the lived experiences of the participants. Narrative Inquiry, also known as life histories, life story research, and oral history, is all captured under the discipline of *narratology*. Narratology also intersects with other disciplines such as history, anthropology, psychology, art, and education (Hatch, 2002). Narrative Inquiry allowed me to gain an understanding about a problem from the context of the participant, and to give them a voice through the sharing of their stories (Creswell, 2009). Those stories that Narrative Inquiry seeks to tell are the stories of individual experiences related to the phenomena being studied (Connelly et al., 1990; Creswell, 2013).

Robinson, Esquibel, and Rich (2013) argue that “drawing on Black Feminist Theory allows us to place Black women’s voices at the center of research to rearticulate subjugated knowledge into *specialized knowledge*, as well as support epistemologies and theories about Black women” (p.58). Therefore, the use of Narrative Inquiry, coupled with BFT, was an ideal approach for the conduct of this study, as I merged an epistemology and methodology that together provided the participants with a way to tell their story in their own words.

To learn about the women’s experiences, Narrative Inquiry was used to allow the women to tell stories about their experiences through three semi-structured, ninety-minute interviews. Narrative Inquiry was appropriate for this study because it captures individual life histories and experiences as told by the participants. Narrative Inquiry was also appropriate because it

considers the three dimensions with which researchers interact during their study. Clandinin et al. (2000) describe this three-dimensional space as the personal and social (interaction), the past, present and future (continuity), and the place (situation). When conducting my study, it was important to be cognizant of these dimensions, and how they affected the development of my research, selection of my participants, data collection, and the presentation and representation of the women's stories in the final narrative. Clandinin et al. (2000) define this as:

Using this set of terms, any inquiry is defined by this three-dimensional space: studies have temporal dimensions and address temporal matters: they focus on the personal and the social in a balance appropriate to the inquiry: and they occur in specific places or sequences of places. (p. 54)

The ultimate goal for using Narrative Inquiry was to develop stories about the women's experiences and to discuss the role counterspace had in their persistence during doctoral study.

Narrative Inquiry was used to capture each women's story individually and allowed me, the researcher, the ability to weave them together to present a common standpoint, or prevalent themes, which is consistent with BFT. In addition, I used BFT to develop the protocol, which helped to ensure that the protocol questions demonstrate linkages to the key concepts within BFT. Secondly, BFT was used in the data analysis to develop the codes for data analysis along with the key BFT theoretical concepts as guideposts. An important role of BFT in the study was to ensure that BFT was used to make connections to the participants' stories, and to analyze their lived experiences. Using semi-structured interviews, I asked the participants to tell me about their experiences in graduate school as they related to advising, mentoring, peer and faculty interactions, academic and non-academic counterspace.

3.1.1 My Ontological and Epistemological Positioning

Before approaching any research, it was imperative for me to position the work within a specific epistemology. Epistemology is defined as the way of knowing (Creswell, 2013; Hatch 2002). We each espouse certain beliefs about what knowledge is and how knowledge is created. Various paradigms exist, and each paradigm contains both an ontology, what one believes is reality, and an epistemology, what is known. These perspectives frame those paradigms, and each is very different from the other. Where a researcher positions themselves is important, because it will ultimately guide how to approach the research. Therefore, it was important to evaluate my own ontological and epistemological assumptions before beginning the study.

The constructivist paradigm espouses an ontology which asserts that multiple realities exist, and that knowledge is a result of human construction involving both the participant and the researcher co-constructing reality based on their lived experiences (Creswell, 2013; Hatch, 2002; Mertens, 2010). Hatch (2002) states that constructivism challenges positivism's belief that reality can be "known, captured and evaluated" (p. 13). Finally, constructivists seek to understand reality and its multiple constructions through personal approaches to collect data, such as in-depth interviews (Mertens, 2010). My ontology and epistemology closely align with the constructivist paradigm, as I believe that reality is variable, and everyone has their own type of reality. That reality is created based on multiple factors, such their collective life experience, up-bringing, socio-economic status, and is highly situational. BFT's epistemology is also that of critical constructivist because, in addition to its purpose of rearticulation of Black women's experience, it considers the intersection of race and gender. Thus, I approached this research with a critical constructivist perspective, and acknowledge the impact this will have on the research.

3.1.2 Researcher Subjectivity

Qualitative research is conducted with a human being as the mechanism by which data is collected. Thus, qualitative researchers must acknowledge their biases, personal experiences, and theoretical inclinations before initiating the research. My role as a bi-racial, female doctoral student at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) had the potential to influence the research process, data analysis, and results. I was motivated to conduct this study based on my own graduate school experiences. While I am both fully Black and fully White, I have experienced life as Black woman, and identify more as a Black female than as a bi-racial female. I have completed two master's degrees at two separate institutions, and found that I had similar experiences at both institutions. I was also acutely aware of the lack of diversity within the faculty and student body during each of my experiences. Upon enrolling in my doctoral program, I noticed that my White counterparts had more information than did I, and were more connected with the program and their peers. To try to better understand my own experience, I began research in this area, ultimately providing the driving force for this study. In addition to being a student at this PWI, I am also a full-time, mid-level administrator who occupies a critical role within my department. My position has provided me with additional insight into how the institution operates and its overarching philosophies. It has also fueled my research, because I have relationships with other members of institutional leadership, increasing my accessibility which can be utilized to inform change through my work.

I believe that being viewed as a member of the participant population as a Black female doctoral student allowed the participants to feel more comfortable sharing their experiences, as they did not view me as an outsider. Hence, my experiences have shaped this study. Being aware of my own subjectivity is necessary to allow the readers to make decisions about the best

ways to use the data. In conjunction, my use of BFT as a lens for the study was critical as it allowed the women to give a voice to their experiences.

3.2 RESEARCH SETTING

The site of this research study is a large, public, Predominately White Institution (PWI) in the Northeast. The institution is primarily an undergraduate degree granting, research intensive institution in the Northeast part of the United States. The institution is situated in an urban city, and has a combined undergraduate and graduate enrollment of more than 27,000 students. The undergraduate student body is comprised of approximately 15, 000 White students and 900 Black students. The graduate student body contains approximately 9,500 students with only 387 of those graduate students reported as Black. Of those 387 Black graduate students, it is unclear how many are women, as the institution does not have that information publicly available. The institution hosts 15 graduate schools, which includes both law and medical schools. The total number of students enrolled in doctoral programs at the time of the study was 2,184, with only 133 reported as Black. In 2016, the institution awarded 2,309 master's degrees and 1,087 doctoral degrees, but they do not report the breakdown on race, gender, and ethnicity for this data. Graduate student support is relegated to each individual graduate school, as the institutional structure does not include a central office to oversee graduate studies.

The institution has several programs that provide support for the faculty, staff and students related to diversity. These support groups include one that is geared toward Black faculty and staff, while the other support groups are geared toward special populations of students. There is one group for Black undergraduate students; however, none specifically for

Black women. In addition, there was only one formal organization on campus for the overall graduate student population, which is handled by student affairs. It appears that the institution handles graduate student support in an extremely decentralized fashion, and each school is responsible for designing and implementing its own diversity initiatives. The institution enrolls graduate students largely on a full-time basis, and funding for graduate students depends on the chosen discipline and availability of funds from the school.

3.3 PARTICIPANTS

The study included four women, all enrolled in or graduated from a doctoral program within six months of their initial interview. All the women were enrolled in or graduated from the same school of education, and none were enrolled in the same program within the school. To be included in the study, the women had to self-identify as Black, be currently enrolled in or recently graduated from the doctoral program, and agree to be interviewed three times. Those who were current students must have completed at least one year of study to be considered for inclusion in the study. This requirement was to ensure that the participants had enough time to become familiar with their program and the institution. Women from all academic disciplines were eligible to participate in the study; however, only one woman who was not enrolled in a program in education responded. She ultimately left her program and, therefore, she could not be included in the study. The women were recruited through criterion sampling, which required that each participant meet specific criteria to be included in the study (Patton, 2002). For this study, an Inclusion Criteria Survey (Appendix B) was a requirement for each participant to

complete in order to evaluate if they had experience with academic and non-academic counterspace.

All the women in the study are over the age of 35; three are employed full-time; and two are divorced. This indicates that the women entered doctoral studies with considerable life and professional experience, which could also affect how they experience graduate school. Of the four women, two are first generation college students and all are the first in their families to pursue a doctorate.

Participants were recruited through an informal network established by the institution bringing together graduate students of color on a quarterly basis for dinner discussions with accompanying presentations. Throughout this dinner series I met several Black, female doctoral students and to ask them to participate in the study or to refer me to other Black, female doctoral students or recent graduates who would be interested in participation. The three women I met during the dinner series agreed to participate. They completed the Inclusion Criteria Survey and were selected to participate in the study. One participant was recruited through Facebook. I contacted her through an instant message, and asked her if she would be interested in participation; she agreed. She also completed the Inclusion Criteria Survey and was subsequently enrolled into the study. Two other women were interested in participation. One completed the inclusion survey, but later was not able to continue as she left her program. The other completed the inclusion survey, but did not have any involvement with counterspace; therefore, she was not enrolled in the study. Those who were enrolled in the study completed a Demographic Survey (Appendix C) to collect basic demographic information. Once the participants completed and returned the demographic survey, they were scheduled for the first of three interviews.

3.4 DATA COLLECTION

The most common data collection methods used to perform Narrative Inquiry studies are in-depth interviewing, observation, and document review (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative interviewing allows researchers to ask specific questions targeted toward a topical area under inquiry. In qualitative research, the researcher becomes the data-gathering instrument and collects the data, unlike quantitative methods where external instruments are used to collect the data (Hatch, 2002). One of the most widely used types of interviewing is in-depth, semi-structured interviewing. Semi-structured interviewing is a naturalistic qualitative research method involving the use of a well-organized and developed interview protocol comprised of open-ended questions (Hatch, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Hermeneutics, or the study of interpretive meaning, are applied to the entire research process, including the development of the interview questions, to guide the development of the questions that will acquire the fundamental data or phenomena under study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Document analysis is also one of the data collection methods used when conducting a study using Narrative Inquiry. Document analysis incorporates the analysis of other kinds of artifacts, such as journals and brochures, to provide an additional glimpse into the area being studied. These kinds of analyses can be done as stand-alone Narrative Inquiry studies or in addition to other methods, such as interviews as part of a Narrative Inquiry study. For this study, I wrote down my thoughts in a journal during and after each interview. The journals, in addition to interview data, were important in the construction of the final narrative.

As part of this study, semi-structured interviews, as defined by Hatch (2002), were conducted as the primary data collection method. Semi-structured interviews are interviews in which a specific well-designed set of questions is prepared to ask the participant during a set

period of time and are most often recorded. However, those questions are just guides and the interview may deviate from the interview protocol to ask follow-up questions if necessary (Hatch, 2002). In a three-series model, participants are interviewed three separate times for 90 minutes, anywhere from three days to one week apart. For this study, during the first interview, the participants were asked about their life history and why they decided to pursue a doctoral degree, and to talk about their experiences leading them into doctoral study. These questions were asked as opened-ended questions to allow participants to discuss their experience in their own words. In the second interview, participants were asked follow-up questions, or clarifying questions, related to their experience. This interview allowed the participants to reconstruct the details of their experience for me (Seidman, 2013). Finally, in the third interview, participants were asked to make meaning of their experience, and to co-construct that meaning in conjunction with the researcher (Seidman, 2013). A copy of the full interview protocol is available in Appendix D. BFT allowed me to capture the experiences of this unique population and rearticulate the findings in their own voice as they related to the intersection of their race and gender.

3.5 DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative data analysis methods can be done through a variety of approaches. In Narrative inquiry, the goal is to “restore the participants’ stories by presenting the plot, setting, actions, climax and denouncement” (Creswell, 2009, p. 184). It is important to note that data analysis in a Narrative Inquiry study often begins at the outset of the study, and the analysis is being constantly co-constructed in a way that renders it unclear when the data analysis begins

(Connelly et al., 1990). In addition, the process of journaling is a standard practice for both researchers and participants engaged in a Narrative Inquiry study which contributes to the overall story. These journal entries or field texts are entered into the overall dataset, converted into research texts, and incorporated into the final narrative. These texts helped to add richness and strengthen the story I was attempting to tell. For this study, journals were kept throughout the data collection process, and I included the journaling with the interview data for coding and creation of the final narrative.

Narrative methodologists use a specific process by which to analyze the data, which begins with organizing the data, so that items that are redundant can easily be removed. This is known as narrative smoothing (Clandinin et al., 2000). Various organization methods can be utilized for Narrative Inquiry, and I had to select a method that was appropriate for this study. Two that are very popular for narrative methodologists are chronological organization and thematic organization.

3.6 PERSONAL EXPERIENCE NARRATIVES

For this study, both personal experience narrative and thematic analysis was conducted. A personal experience narrative is defined by Akinsanya and Bach (2014) as “a story which was experienced firsthand by the narrator” (p. 2). First, for the personal experience narratives, the participant’s stories were organized through a chronological organization of the data. This was done in the form of vignettes, or short stories, from the one-on-one interviews with the participants. The primary goal of a Narrative Inquiry-based study is to keep the participant’s stories intact as much as possible, instead of breaking the data up into smaller data-sets or codes

(Clandinin et al., 2000). The aim of this study was to adhere to this principle as closely as possible, so that each woman's voice would be heard through the telling of their individual stories. The presentation of personal experience narratives is also consistent with BFT, which aims to provide voice to Black women through the sharing of their own experiences. It was important to incorporate BFT into the development of the women's personal experience narratives, as BFT was the conceptual framework used to guide the study.

3.7 THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE STORIES

Secondly, thematic analysis of the stories was conducted as a more generalized method of organizing the data to consider the major events that participants report (Clandinin et al., 2000). This method can be described as the "who, what, when and where" method of organizing the data, whereas the chronological organization focuses on the development of the narrative in a sequential order with a distinct beginning, middle and end (Clandinin et al., 2000). Once the narrative smoothing was completed, the careful process of reading and re-reading the data to become familiar with the data was completed. The importance of this was to help with the process of building the overall narrative, or findings of the study. During the read-through of each of the interview transcripts, I created a separate document to track specific themes that were present in each of the women's stories. This was helpful in connecting each woman's story with overarching themes, and helped me to identify the theme that were most salient throughout the participant's stories. This was only possible once I was comfortable with the data, and assisted in the process of coding the data thematically.

The approach used to code the data for the discussion section of the dissertation is thematic coding/analysis. Creswell (2013) defines thematic coding/analysis as “broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form one common idea” (p. 186). This is the juncture where I further dissected these broad units of information, or codes, into subcodes, or subcategories, until they were small enough to make meaning of the stories presented by the participants. Thematic analysis required that I work closely with the datasets to develop codes to produce the final narrative. This was a painstaking and very structured process in which I conducted several coding phases before finalizing the data for the final report (Creswell, 2009). Deductive coding of the data was done manually to develop and present the salient themes found within the participant’s narratives. I used BFT as an interpretive lens to code the data, and looked for themes consistent with BFT to connect the narratives and the themes to BFT. The data analysis plan for the study can be found in Appendix F.

3.8 LIMITATIONS

Every research study has limitations. Researchers must present the limitations to acknowledge their existence and to provide opportunities for future research (Blooming & Volpe, 2016). Narrative Inquiry has been criticized as a research method due to it being based on personal experience, which cannot be verified. In addition, Narrative Inquiry requires the researcher to interpret the information provided by the participant, which can leave room for misinterpretation and misrepresentation of the participant’s experience. The original plan for recruitment included participants from other disciplines; however, during the recruitment phase, one of the participants who was from another discipline took a leave of absence from her

program, which rendered her ineligible for participation in the study. Due to the short timeline for recruitment, the recruitment strategy changed, and women were recruited through a dinner series, which resulted in all of the women being students from a school of education. One additional limitation to consider is the experiences of the participants from one site, which are likely influenced by the institutional culture, so the experiences of the participants cannot be universal. Although the data represents the experiences of the Black women from that site, it does not represent the experiences of all Black women. I also requested that each woman review their personal experience narrative to ensure that I did not misrepresent or misinterpret what was shared in the interviews. Third, inclusion of women from one discipline and one school does not allow for the findings to be generalized to other schools or disciplines. However, this could be an indication of a larger phenomenon at work within this school, and could indicate areas of opportunity for this school to build upon. The women's voices could be the tipping point for change within their school, and create a cascade of potential change through the telling of their stories.

3.9 TRUSTWORTHINESS

Trustworthiness, or credibility, is of critical importance for any research study to ensure that the study is reliable and valid (Creswell, 2013). As a member of the population being studied, it was important that the study have well-supported methods to build trustworthiness into the study. This was accomplished through several methods. The first was the use of a well-established and widely-accepted research method, Narrative Inquiry, which provides trustworthiness, because methods that are well-known have been tested and adapted over time

(Shenton, 2004). Secondly, the additional use of BFT to guide the study also increased trustworthiness through analytic generalization (Mills, Durepos & Wiebe, 2010). Thirdly, upon completion of the analysis, the participants were asked to review the findings to ensure that I did not misrepresent their statements. This process is known by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as “member checking.” This method involved the participants once again and was conducted after the interviews were completed and the narrative was constructed. Each woman had the opportunity to read it, as well as make comments and suggestions regarding their narratives. These revisions were minimal and the women all agreed that their stories were well-presented and representative of the experiences they shared during the interviews. This is another example of how the narrative was co-constructed between myself and the participant. Lastly, the process of journaling, which is also known as reflective commentary, can add trustworthiness to the study because it allowed me to capture their initial impressions from each interview session and, as the study progressed, allowed me to evaluate their entries against the data to look for patterns and themes (Shenton, 2004). In addition, it is important to include this step because, as a critical constructivist epistemology, I believe reality is a product of the co-construction of reality between myself as the researcher and the participant (Hatch, 2002).

3.10 CHAPTER CONCLUSION

Narrative Inquiry in conjunction with BFT was the best method available for this study because it focused on the lived experiences of Black women. It allowed the women to tell their stories in their own words, and for me as the researcher, to participate fully to co-construct those stories. As an individual who views knowledge and truth as varied, this method was comfortable

and well suited for me to present multiple versions of the truth simultaneously through the voices of participants. The current literature is riddled with negative stories about how Black women experience doctoral study. It is my desire through this study to change the conversation, and to more openly discuss the positive experiences of Black women while pursuing the doctorate. It is imperative that we begin to tell stories about Black women creating spaces of freedom, and who have utilized counterspace to provide support and encouragement during their doctoral journey. Narrative Inquiry allowed those stories to be captured and reconstructed for other Black women to read and to internalize while working toward their own doctoral dream.

4.0 FINDINGS

4.1 EXPERIENCES DURING DOCTORAL STUDIES

This Chapter will present the findings of the study through the presentation of personal experience narratives of each of the women. Presented alongside each personal experience narrative is a thematic analysis of the narrative. The salient themes identified within each woman's personal experience narrative are presented to provide a more detailed interpretation of the findings.

All the women (n = 4) in this study had graduate school experiences consistent with the current literature, solidifying an understanding of how Black women experience graduate school. The women in this study were asked questions about their graduate school experiences, which included their experience with advising, faculty and peer interaction, academic opportunities, and how their race and gender influenced their experiences. Finally, the study's central aim was to understand the role of academic and non-academic counterspace for Black women pursuing the doctorate. The women in the study reported being involved and, more importantly, helping to create academic counterspace. Each utilized non-academic counterspace as a means of persistence throughout their doctoral studies. To understand the role of both academic and non-academic counterspace, it is important to first understand how the women experienced graduate school. In this chapter, I discuss each of the women's stories, highlighting the challenges they

faced, and then discussing the counterspace they used to persist. The women's stories are shared alongside the salient themes that emerged through thematic analysis. Those themes are presented immediately following the women's stories to place their experiences into context.

The women in this study entered doctoral studies from a variety of disciplines and for a variety of reasons. Business, communications, psychology, physics and African-American studies were a few of the undergraduate and graduate degrees these Black women possessed. These four women collectively hold four bachelor's degrees, six master's degrees, two doctorates, and have two pending doctorates, for a total of fourteen degrees. They were all enrolled in the same School of Education -- three to obtain the Doctor of Philosophy and one to obtain a Doctorate in Education. In addition to their degrees, they find common ground in their graduate school experiences. Their reasons for pursuing the doctorate vary as well, but all center around the idea of helping others, especially Black women, become more successful and have more positive experiences than they have faced. Sheila wants to "make an impact on the next generation and touch lives," while Kimberly desires to "have a voice" in her current role. Both Rachel and Danielle desire to obtain a certain level of position that will allow them to make it better for those who are to come. Overall, these women shared their passion for education as a primary reason for pursuing the doctorate. However, of the four women, two (Sheila and Kimberly) always knew they wanted to obtain a terminal degree, but took more than a decade to make the final commitment toward pursuing their doctoral degree. Danielle thought about it, but was not sure if she would pursue it, and Rachel never desired to or envisioned herself pursuing a doctorate.

In terms of their experiences prior to pursuing their doctorate, the women shared many commonalities. One factor that was consistent within the group was their focus on education and

academics throughout their lives. They all were high achievers during their educational journey, mostly due to their family's insistence on being involved in as many academic opportunities as possible. Their engagement in academics, both in and out of school, set them on a trajectory that made pursuing a doctorate possible. Coming from diverse backgrounds, and attending diverse colleges and universities for both undergraduate and graduate studies, provided these women with experiences prior to their doctoral enrollment. These experiences allowed them to evaluate their experiences from various perspectives and standpoints. All but one of their prior graduate school institutions were Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) that, as Danielle said, was "totally different" from what they experienced at their doctoral institution. They were accustomed to being the only Black student in a class while attending PWIs. However, despite their minoritized status on those campuses, they felt that the institutions had structures in place, and cultural support that helped them to feel a sense of connectedness that they did not have at their doctoral institutions. The data analysis highlighted both the existence and importance of academic and non-academic counterspace for Black women pursuing their doctorate. The salient themes that emerged from the data included the importance of strong academic advising, peer and non-academic mentors, support from same-race faculty and peers, and counterspace. In this Chapter, narratives of these Black women's experiences are shared to provide an in-depth understanding of these themes. They are demonstrated as these women describe the experiences they had while they pursued their doctorates and recalibrated their academic lives.

4.2 DEVELOPING INFORMAL ACADEMIC COUNTERSPACE: “STRUGGLE BUDDIES”

Rachel’s story begins in grade school, where she was an inquisitive child who others considered bright, intelligent, and going places. She loved science and math. Throughout her formative years, she participated in many academic opportunities, both in school and outside of class. Her parents were the primary reason for Rachel’s immersion in academics. As foreign immigrants who came to the United States to provide a better life for their children, they insisted on Rachel and her other siblings being involved in activities that would promote academic excellence and produce high achievement. Academics were normal for Rachel, and she was extremely intelligent. However, she admitted that, “I didn’t even want to get my bachelor’s, but the choices that my parents presented were, get a job, go to school, or move out of the country.” Rachel decided that she would go to college and eventually obtained a degree in communications. She then attended graduate school where she acquired a master’s degree in education. Attaining a doctorate was not something she ever considered or desired. She enjoyed her experience so much at her master’s institution that she decided to make a career out of higher education administration. She began a profession in student affairs. This was both rewarding and challenging for Rachel, and she continued working in academia. She still was uncertain about returning for her doctorate. “I was working for a university and the dean of the college said that they saw a lot more in me, and they wanted me to try and advance myself because I had a lot to say, but people listen more to you when you have alphabets behind your name.” That was the start of her doctoral journey. She applied to her doctoral program and decided three weeks before the start to accept the offer. Rachel packed up and moved to a strange city, where she knew no one and had no connections.

From the start, Rachel knew her experience at her doctoral institution was going to be different from her previous institutions. She noticed that there were very few students of color, faculty of color, or people of color on the campus. Because she expected this institution to be like her master's institution and the college she worked for, she was not ready for the culture shock that was waiting for her when she arrived. "There wasn't a club. There weren't students. When I entered the program, I think there was like five other Black students but none in -- There was one girl, but she was part-time. Other than that, there was none in the program. I was the only -- It was only the two of us in our class." This was not something typical for Rachel. At her previous institutions, she reports, "I had three Black female faculty members, and the President of my master's institution was a Black female." Even though each of her prior institutions was a PWI, she had a completely different experience in terms of diversity and how this made her feel as a Black woman.

I always enter predominantly white institutions. They were -- I feel like they were whiter institutions [than my doctoral institution]. My master's institution -- it was a little more, but it was still predominantly white. The city was predominantly white, just like my doctoral institution, but it was just a totally different experience.

Rachel described her doctoral program as, "Lily white, and you could count the students of color that graduated. The faculty was even worse. The faculty was filled with older white men, and younger faculty members I guess, technically, males of color. There weren't even really any women. There were but they were like older white women." This lack of diversity, and seeing no other students that looked like Rachel, made her feel isolated and alone. "They [the doctoral institution] didn't care about diversity, they didn't care about graduate students, they didn't care about anything or the students in general I think." Rachel was deeply affected

by what she saw and experienced during her doctoral studies. Being a student affairs professional added another concern for her, because she understood what should have been happening. She decided that she would use this experience to help others, even while she was going through her own experience.

I went into my advisor at the time and I remember saying to him, 'I'm gonna make sure that any student behind me doesn't have the same experience that I have, because this is horrible.' And I remember his response to me, he says to me 'that's not your concern, you should worry about you' and that just, you know, it stuck to me because I feel like that was the mentality of the institution. It just wasn't just him. He verbally said it, but I feel like the actions of others exemplified what he said.

Rachel's experience was felt at every level, with her peers and the faculty. It impacted her ability to complete her degree in a shorter timeframe. At the time of our interview, Rachel had completed her degree requirements and was working on her dissertation. It took her close to six years to complete her degree and, when I asked her about the length of time, she shared the following:

So, I think I could have actually graduated in four years had I had clear structure, what the program is, better advisement. And because I have been thinking about this lately, it might not even be their advisement in the program. I think that would have helped, so it was like all the odds were stacked against me. So, anyone who graduated from my program needs a medal, because the only way that you get through is like happenstance. There is no clear structure or good advisement.

Rachel, like the other women in the study, all had more than one advisor throughout their program. Rachel had three. Her first was a white man with whom she did not connect at all. "I

kept my first advisor for two years, but I saw him a total of fifteen minutes across the two years. He didn't even attend my preliminary exam that he set." Her second advisor got her through her course work and then they parted ways. "Her work style and mine just didn't work." She ended up wasting a semester because she had no advisor, and no direction. Because of that, she could not move forward. "They did a faculty search, and a new woman faculty member came on. Things were great in the beginning but by the end not so good." Rachel said that "my final advisor was a pivotal source of my success. She pushed me when I wasn't in the right mind space, provided me with an assistantship, and pushed me to do research." Her final advisor also provided a safe space for her to explore herself as a Black woman, and this was much different than her experience with her prior advisors. The experiences she had as they related to advising included merely one aspect of her doctoral journey. Her experiences in other aspects were also challenging.

We [her doctoral institutional leadership] are always talking about the woes of the Black man and it's like what about the Black woman? The people here are not talking about it and you hear all these stats about the Black man, but there's not that many more Black females that are around, and it's -- They're not getting any help and they are still succeeding. So, suppose they did get help, like, what would be going on? So, that is my plight: I am the Black girl that makes a lot of noise, because I'm tired.

Rachel felt as though her program was not providing adequate assistance to women of color, especially Black women. She also noted in her quote above, the gender-based differences, and the comparison of Black women and Black men. She felt that not only did the institution cater to Whites, it also catered to Black and Brown men due to "feeling bad" for them. Black women were left behind as a result. "They didn't support women in general, and Black women

got even less.” She said “So, if it wasn’t for the Black female faculty member and one White male faculty member, I would have never gotten done. They gave me the most valuable feedback and provided me with direction.” As members of a dually-oppressed group, the women in the study had to deal with intersectionality and often found themselves in situations where their race and gender collided. Rachel describes her experience as a Black woman, in contrast to the Black man’s experience. She perceived the Black man as “not understanding the issues,” and felt as though the institution and program “catered to the Black and Brown men” because they “felt bad” for them. She did not believe Black women received the same level of support. This positionality supports Collins’ (2000) principle of the “outsider within” status, as members of the academy, but not permitted to have full membership due to the intersection of their race and gender in an environment that was deemed as “male-centric” and “predominantly white.” Black women’s exclusion from full participation further rejects their experiences and realities.

What motivated her to stay the course in a white-washed space with poor advising? As Rachel indicated, there was a lack of diversity, not only in the student body, but also within the faculty. Her experience could have compelled her to leave doctoral study, but she continued pursuing her degree although she felt alone and misunderstood. I asked her how she managed to complete her degree with all that she had experienced, and what kept her from dropping out like so many others had done. “I have struggle buddies. So, I have people I don’t have to explain my life to because they just get it. So, I don’t have to explain my work, or theories, or put the work in context, because they just get it and get me.” Having this group of “struggle buddies” provided an outlet for Rachel that she needed to feel connected while in the program. This group of “struggle buddies” gave her the support she was lacking but yearning -- people that she could share with, both academically and personally. “You always feel like you’re by yourself, like I

always feel like I have to explain who I am with this group. I don't have to do that." The group Rachel spoke about during the interview was a group of current doctoral students who were women of color, and who were supported by a female faculty of color. She said, "So, by the end I did meet like wonderful people. So, they were a bunch of women, women of color, that ended up being my support group. I interacted with scholars at other institutions, and this got me to participate in a lot more activities, and to put my student affairs side to work. I was able to still help other people, but I feel like I was the guinea pig."

Rachel's other support systems included her family. She said that her family was very supportive of her goal to obtain her doctorate, but she, like the other women, felt family could be another source of stress. Her main sources of support have come from her family, church, and the group of women she called her "struggle buddies." She said, "If I didn't have these supports, there would be no experience. I would not be here to be interviewed, because I would not have finished." The informal group has been transformative in her experience. Until she became connected with this group, she felt "alone and isolated." She kept going solely because "I had so much debt, and my parents' pressure. There were also former students pushing me, and the current students pushing me. In the end, I just wanted more for me." Her commitment to those who were to come after her was a driving force in her journey. She stressed, "Just my presence here changes the game for other people. One of our other Black female students came to this school just because she saw me pursuing a degree. So, it's my presence here that keeps me going."

4.2.1 The Importance of Informal Academic Counterspace

In Rachel's case, an informal academic counterspace was the most critical component necessary for her success as a Black woman. Due to poor academic advisement, and a lack of students and faculty of color to connect with, she, like the other women in the study, described themselves as feeling alone, lost and having no sense of belonging. Each of the four women described their experience in the program as lonely until they made connections with other students of color. As Rachel explained the impact of her academic counterspace, "You always feel like you're by yourself, like I have to explain who I am. With this group, I don't have to do that." For Rachel, it was about bringing her entire identity as a Black woman to her doctoral experience. This academic counterspace provided what was absent for Rachel, a place to belong. Collins (2000) outlines these safe spaces as places to "construct individual and collective voices." These safe spaces are typically "informal, private dealings among individuals" (p. 102). Rachel's counterspace was developed informally, through general interactions with the women. Some of the relationships began during her coursework, where Rachel was one of a few students of color in her classes. She and the other women of color gravitated toward one another because of their status as women of color. These interactions quickly grew into increasingly solid friendships, and eventually became a counterspace where they provided each other with academic support through activities such as brainstorming, reading and editing of each other's work, and sounding boards for each other on personal matters. This counterspace provided Rachel with a reason to continue pursuing her doctoral degree, and she viewed it as a way to give back and to help others who found themselves in her situation. Counterspace proved to be a saving grace for Rachel, and provided her with support, but also motivated her to help other

Black women in doctoral studies. Rachel turned a negative situation into something positive, and was able to affect others in a positive way as well.

4.3 MOTIVATED BY PEER AND NON-ACADEMIC MENTORS

Danielle is one of many members of her family to graduate from college; however, no one has obtained a doctorate. Her mother and grandmother both attended and completed graduate school, so going to graduate school was something Danielle always knew she would do. However, she did not consider a doctorate until late in her graduate school experience. As someone with dual master's degrees, Danielle was a go-getter and aspiring business woman. She never thought she would find herself pursuing a degree that would take her toward becoming an educator, but that is what she is doing, pursuing a doctorate in education. While working full-time and pursuing her second master's degree, Danielle was drawn into the field of education.

The company I was working for was an education-based non-profit that worked mainly with school board members, superintendents, principals and teachers. So, I worked with them for about five or six years and enjoyed it a lot. We did a lot of work actually going into K-12 schools, and I just enjoyed it. I liked the work we did and the organization itself just had a really good and passionate atmosphere for what they were doing, and that kind of sparked my interest in going back to school.

This was the start of Danielle's pursuit for the doctorate, and this pursuit would present her with several challenges. The challenges Danielle faced were similar to the issues Rachel described. Danielle also had multiple advisors and reported feeling misunderstood, but her biggest challenge was a lack of formal support or mentorship.

At the time of the interview, Danielle had been in pursuit of her degree for over five years and was finally getting closer to graduation. However, her journey started out a bit rocky. She applied and was accepted, but the university only extended funding to her for one year of the program. She was excited about the opportunity to attend, but declined the offer based on the lack of financial support that was offered to her. Danielle was already successful in her career, and was not willing to leave behind that successful career and her family for partial funding. “At first, they only offered me one year, and I wrote them back and said thank you for your time, but I’m not moving up there. I can’t move up there and only be funded for one year; the program is more than one year. Then they wrote me back and offered me funding for three years and I was very excited about that.”

It was then that Danielle decided to leave her career and family and pursue her doctorate. It was scary leaving home, moving to a city where she had no family or friends, but Danielle was confident in herself and her new institution. She packed up and went to start the next chapter in her life. “It was very eye-opening and it was a little bit scary, because here I am. I left a good job. It wasn’t like I left because I didn’t like my job. I left a really good company, a really good non-profit, to move away from my family, move away from friends.” Danielle hoped that her new institution would be able to provide the support she would need as someone in this situation, but what she would find did not match her expectations. “I didn’t know anything about it, but I found out very quickly. Like in my first year, I wasn’t finding support, but I couldn’t just pack up and go back. I have to finish this.” Danielle was used to finishing what she started, and this would be no different. She continued in the program and was determined not to quit. This degree would test her in every way imaginable. Thankfully, she was strong and resilient, because she would need it if she was going to complete this degree.

Academically strong, Danielle found the coursework to be challenging, yet manageable; however, she felt unsure about her direction in the program, and how to navigate the program and its requirements. She explained it as such:

The program structure itself is different. This is your first one, and you don't really know what to expect; you just know you're going to further your education. Okay, that is wonderful to hear; this is going to be exciting you think. Well that's great for the first year, but then the second year you're just kind of thrust into -- Okay, so what is going to be your topic? What is going to be your focus? And you haven't really thought about narrowing it down, so all the sudden the pressure comes because now you only have a certain amount of time left for coursework, and you spent this whole first year all over the map.

Danielle needed more support academically, but finding that support was challenging. She knew help was available but didn't feel as though it was accessible.

You just have to create it for yourself and figure it out. It was like the minimum academic support that you need in order to feel like you're progressing throughout the program and not feel like you're floating, especially toward the end when you're trying to wrap everything up and you have been floating for two or three years. It just gets kind of frustrating that you don't have the support to get you to the finish line, and you have to pretty much get yourself there.

Of the women in the study, Danielle was the only participant in the study that had the same advisor her entire time in her program. When asked how she could have utilized her advisor to help her to navigate the program and process better, she said that "my advisor is great; he has provided me with great emotional support and been an advocate, but he could only do so

much because the program was poorly structured.” She talked highly of her advisor who is a White male, who she said, “understood women of color in PWIs,” and, because of his “position of power,” was able to be a necessary ally for her as a Black woman. She discovered through experience that having allies would prove to be critical for her persistence in the program. She recalled a very uncomfortable experience in which racially suggestive comments were made by a faculty member. “I wanted to speak up and say something to the professor, but I knew I still had a long time to go to finish the program and I was afraid of retaliation, so I kept quiet, but another White student approached me and said that she would support me in going to talk with someone, and we did.” This was a positive and unexpected experience in the program that she had with a fellow peer, but she wasn’t comfortable going to her advisor about it because “he doesn’t like conflict” and she felt that nothing would be done. In discussing how her race and gender impacted her, especially with this experience, she said, “it’s a good thing, because I have never been more focused and aware.” She describes her experience as a Black woman as “difficult in this program” because “every day you feel it, and no one understands you. You have no sense of belonging or connectedness.” She felt, as did other women in the study, that she had to consistently explain herself to everyone, including Black men. These situations caused Danielle to feel like she was “fighting both battles and trying to justify what I feel.” This was hard for her as a Black woman looking for support and understanding in her program. However, she, like the other women, felt that race was the most influential of the two when it came to her experience. “Race was most influential, especially in classroom interactions. Other students didn’t get what you were saying, and so there were times when I just didn’t comment.”

Danielle, like Rachel, indicated that her support systems existed both inside and outside of her institution in the form of peer and non-academic mentors. She, like Rachel, attributes her

persistent in the program to those peer and non-academic mentors that she describes as “peers that became friends or, as I like to call, them my academic boos.” These peer and non-academic mentors she described were “other Black women, and women of color” who were enrolled in doctoral programs at her institution, and other professional women who provided her with academic and professional advisement during her enrollment. She said, “I am able to lean on them and find common ground. They push me and tell me that it is possible. We provide vital support for each other and help each other out.” In particular, she credits her group of peer mentors with allowing her to be herself and not have to “subtract Black, and just do feminism.” She could be a Black woman and share her experience as a Black woman with this group and not have to “separate race from gender depending on what was being talked about.” For Danielle, these peer mentors helped her find “a safe space and develop real connections.” She talked about the non-academic counterspace activities they did, such as hosting game nights, going to local happy hours, and other social activities where they got to know one another and “form deeper connections outside of the classroom that helped us inside of the classroom.”

In terms of other non-academic mentors, Danielle said she had “no academic mentors” but did have “mentors inside and outside of education,” and many in the non-profit community. In fact, she benefited greatly from a mentor in the non-profit sector who introduced her to someone who offered her a position she accepted while pursuing her degree. The position gave her “valuable experience” that she otherwise would not have received if it was not for one of her mentors.

It ended up being the best thing ever, because that’s honestly how I made a lot of my informal and formal connections education-related. I would bring that information back to the school and try to apply that in whatever learning in the classes or the people

that I was meeting and try to see how those connections work. I was seeing the ties and it was making sense because I was getting real world experience that I was trying to connect to what I was reading for in class.

Those mentors assisted Danielle in many ways, and she admits that without those mentors and those connection “it would have been very, very difficult and I would have made some decisions on what I want to do, and what avenue I want to take, that wouldn’t be what I want to do when I graduate.” Those mentors and networks she created were described as “social links I created myself.”

At the time of her interviews, Danielle was getting closer to graduation. She successfully completed her dissertation proposal defense, and was in the process of conducting her study. When I asked her how her experience would be different without these support systems, she said “I’m glad I came here, but I don’t know if I would still be here. I felt obligated. I left so much to come here. If I didn’t have these women in my corner, I wouldn’t finish.” When I asked her what she would change about her journey, she simply said, “I would have spoken up sooner and I would have told them what I needed.”

4.3.1 The Importance of Mentoring

For Danielle, mentoring was a critical component of her experience, even prior to entering doctoral studies. Individuals who served as her mentors at her place of employment helped to guide her toward her decision to enter doctoral studies. Most importantly, the passion they demonstrated toward their work influenced Danielle’s decision to pursue a doctorate in education. Once enrolled, Danielle expected to find academic mentors to provide support and guidance during her enrollment. However, Danielle reported feeling as though she was floating

and had insufficient support. It was through the connections she made with other peers that she could find the academic and non-academic support she needed. Her peer mentors provided her the tools to navigate through the “hidden curriculum of the program, helped her with her coursework, and supported her during the independent phase of her program. These peer mentors also provided her with access to their networks, which proved to be critical to her decision related to her research focus. This new focus helped Danielle to center her research agenda, and helped her to situate her work in one area. Finishing her degree had new meaning, and those peer and non-academic mentors helped her to find that meaning.

4.4 SUPPORT FROM SAME RACE FACULTY

Attending graduate school was always something Sheila knew she wanted to do. She didn't, however, know that she wanted to pursue the doctorate. As a young undergraduate student at a Historically Black College and University (HBCU), Sheila remembers being pushed to get the highest degree that she could. She recalls her days as an undergraduate and the “feeling that everything and everyone was there to help me succeed,” and succeed she did. She graduated with a degree in science and decided to apply to graduate school. Her initial desire was to apply to a professional school, but decided that she could make “more of an impact on the next generation and touch more lives” as an educator. She was pleased with her decision and thought that her journey would stop there; however, what she found was it was only the beginning of her journey in graduate school. She admits that she was happy with obtaining her master's degree but realized that there were a lot of people in her classes that were pursuing the doctorate, and that is when she started to imagine herself pursuing her doctorate too.

She applied to a doctoral program within her first year, was accepted and enrolled after she completed her master's degree. She took a few classes but decided to "take a break." That break lasted almost three years and resulted in her applying to her current doctoral program, which took her over a decade to complete. It took Sheila two years to complete her coursework, but the independent research phase was protracted, and it was during this time that Sheila's tenacity and perseverance would be tested. She eventually finished, but there were several critical people and events that happened during this time that allowed her to finish what she imagined for herself all those years ago.

As a Black female in a PWI, Sheila had many obstacles to overcome and many challenges to push through; nevertheless, she certainly did not think that she would experience some of the things she did as a doctoral student. One concern was a "lack of people that understood my research, and the level of inspiration of moving through the process. Those things worked together and created a struggle to complete the degree." Having to explain and re-explain her work, her ideas, and herself to others, including the faculty on a regular basis, was a point of contention for her, yet she persisted. She credits this lack of understanding to the lack of diversity within the program, especially within the faculty. She felt that in this way:

Race, and the significance of race, came in who I am, came in the topic that I was interested in studying, and came in the response of faculty but, was constant in having to explain the value of your research topic, and became exhausting for students of color as they moved through the doc program.

She further explained her experience as such:

I also feel like I watched a culture of the school change, and so at some point students of color, I'll say didn't really go to conferences or engage in research. But over

the years I saw that change. These practices are becoming the norm for students of color because of the change in faculty.

This culture change came late in her attendance and, as a result, Sheila was exposed to many negative experiences during her enrollment which, “made me frustrated.” This frustration was warranted, based on the experiences she had, which started with her original advisor. She had three during her enrollment. Her first advisor she describes as someone who “signed off on her coursework” and who she met with very little during the two years it took her to complete her coursework. She remembers planning her courses, and just going to “get a signature.” Eventually, her advisor left the institution and she was assigned to advisor number two. She was assigned to this advisor at a critical time in her program, her comprehensive exams. She needed guidance to come up with a draft proposal, and when she met with her advisor she got little direction. “It just seemed to be a frustrating challenge to be honest with you. I would write out my proposal in terms of what I wanted in the questions, or the topic, and the advisor would say, ‘oh, this isn’t enough,’ or ‘you should add more,’ or ‘why you are going to just focus on one group of people?’” She describes her third advisor as someone who had better systems in place, better structure, provided better accountability, and connected her to a study group. While she felt, this advisor was the best of the three, she still recalls “just moving through the process. I don’t know if within any of the advisor relationships I had someone who felt like really understood my topic of interest, which related to students of color, and could really guide me.” Advising was only one area where Sheila struggled during her enrollment. Her other interactions with peers and faculty were equally “as frustrating.”

Sheila expressed her interaction with faculty as “varied.” She considered them all to be encouraging, but the level of encouragement and support varied by faculty member. “Some

would say, 'hey you need to finish' and 'I'm like yeah, I do thanks for letting me know that.'" However, there was one faculty member who came in every weekend to provide a place for her to write, even if she sat there for hours writing little to nothing; having that space and support was encouraging to her.

When it came to interactions with her peers, it was minimal until her third advisor. She understood the importance of these interactions but felt, as one of the few students of color, that she had little support from the other students.

My third advisor had a system set up where all of the advisees met in a study group format, but it was more of an assignment from the advisor. I got some feedback but, as one of a few students of color in that group, I felt like I had to provide more context for the people that were reading, or more of an explanation of what I was talking about. And so, it just wasn't productive and, to be honest, I didn't invest a lot of time. It was something I had to do to connect with my advisor.

Sheila's description of this formal study group was another example of how she felt her race was impacting her experience in the doctoral program, and her inability to make connections due to her area of inquiry being race-centered. While her advisor thought, she was creating opportunities for connection and support, for Sheila, a Black woman, this created more distance and frustration as she worked to complete her doctoral degree. This suggests that informal counterspace are more important for Black women, because the formal academic support systems do not take race and gender into account.

It was not until a Black female joined the faculty in her program that Sheila's experiences began to improve. Seeing another Black person, a Black woman as a faculty member, was itself inspirational for Sheila and the other students of color. She remembers being "excited about this

person on board and we found ourselves reaching out to that professor.” It was that singular experience that created a change for Sheila, and other students of color in her program.

In reaching out to that professor, we formed a study group and it was their group - - having them read my writing; having people hear me talk through what I’m thinking and get feedback. Meeting to do work on research became an important part of me moving through the process. It was those people who I could talk to about my research which they could understand, challenge and push me, and keep me accountable when I felt like I didn’t want to do anything.

So, what was the difference between the first study group and the second? Connectedness, understanding, and acceptance. Sheila described her experience with the second study group as one that provided “motivation, encouragement, feedback, a network, prayer and accountability.” She didn’t feel like it was an “assignment from her advisor” but wanted to be a part of this group because she felt like they “understood her.” The study group became a safe space; a place she knew she could be herself, and express herself without having to “constantly explain who she was, or her research.” The group would meet regularly to give each other feedback on their writing and to “check in.” This was the “culture change” that Sheila talked about and she said, “it started with the hiring of the new faculty of color coming on board.” She saw a difference in several things with the new faculty of color. Students of color started to participate in additional academic activities, such as presenting at conferences, and applying for grants. “I don’t know if it was an administrative change or if it was the nature of the new people coming on board, but funding actually started appearing within some of the programs to make it possible for students to go to conferences and have their expenses paid.” Many of the members of the study group, including Sheila, took advantage of the new opportunities and were

successful in obtaining invitations to present at conferences and in receiving grant funding to support their research. While the study group was but one support mechanism for Sheila as she worked to complete her degree, she credits the study group with making sure she finished. “I’m a part of a sorority; I’m an active part of a church community, but I would say that the group really helped me to press through the process of completing my degree at the end of my program.” She says she realized that:

My community doesn’t need to just be the people on campus; it can go beyond the campus, reaching out to scholars that I read about in some of my research, and making connections with them. Going to conferences off-campus and finding people who were interested in the same area, and making connections with them. So, my community, my network, became broader than just the school contacts, and that was a big part of moving through and being able to finish.

Sheila’s journey was a long one. It was filled with many challenges, including poor advisement and a lack of faculty diversity, that contributed to her feeling misunderstood. While it was not easy, Sheila is thankful for what she learned along the way, and for the people who she connected with along her path. When asked what she would change about her journey, she said this: “It would be nice if there was some network, particularly for the students of color, some way to connect them with current students, and maybe previous students, to encourage them through that process. The other thing that I think would be important would be having a voice and connecting with other people who understand you.”

4.4.1 The Importance of Same Race Faculty

Sheila's experience demonstrates the importance of same-race faculty for Black women pursuing a doctorate. Joseph (2012) argues that:

Since there is such a large number of male faculty to female student ratio in every field, particularly female of color, there are (at times) faculty members who are the leaders of discrimination because they have low expectations and stereotypical perceptions of African American and female students. (p. 131)

Patterson et al. (2017) attribute the lack of sufficient numbers of Black female faculty to provide support for Black women as a deficiency that leaves Black women without the opportunity to receive "culturally specific advice and experiential knowledge" (p. 6). This was evident in Sheila's experience as she struggled to complete the independent phase of her degree, until she was connected to a Black female faculty member who supported her through the completion of her degree. Due to the intersectionality of race and gender, it is important for Black women to have not only a faculty member of the same race, but also the same gender.

4.5 NUMEROUS SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

Being a scholar was always part of Kimberly's identity, so it was never a question of whether she would pursue her doctorate. Kimberly's academic success spans her entire educational experience. She graduated as class valedictorian, and was the first in her family to attend college. She attended a college in the Midwest where she pursued a degree in the

humanities, and became a member of an academic achievement organization. That organization set very high standards for its members, one of which was for each student to obtain a terminal degree within ten years. As a high achiever, Kimberly was comfortable with these expectations and embraced them, working hard to complete her bachelor's degree and then her master's degree. However, once she completed her master's degree, Kimberly was burned out, and didn't feel she could stay in school for another four years. After completing a second master's degree, she decided to temporarily delay pursuing her doctorate. That delay lasted nearly a decade. During that time, Kimberly was married and worked in higher education as a student affair professional. Kimberly always knew she needed to go back to obtain her doctorate, but she, like most women, invested so much time in others that she had little time to tend to her dreams, goals and ambitions. Unfortunately, her relationship did not work out and Kimberly found herself at a cross roads. She recalls thinking about her future, and where her life was going in this way:

So, coming off a ten-year relationship where I was kinda investing in me in ways that I hadn't in those previous ten years. I think a precursor to that was the healing that took, you know, that comes on the other side of being divorced. I think it was the first time I ever put myself before others to figure out what do I want to do next. What are some of my goals, and making sure that I get back on track in making sure that my cup was full before I started back.

It was out of this tragedy that gave Kimberly to the courage and motivation to get back to her academic journey, and get that doctorate she always knew she wanted.

Kimberly was accustomed to being underrepresented as a Black woman who attended other PWIs, and having previously worked at a PWI, so she experienced this as a normal part of her academic journey. Her new institution would be no different, and she was ready for what

that meant for a Black woman pursuing a doctorate. This program was one that was structured in a cohort model, so she would be enrolled with a group of students who would all move through the program and the phases together. She developed a three-year plan, and intended to stick to it no matter what. She worked full-time and attended her classes, working hard to complete her coursework on time with the help of her first advisor. Kimberly has had two advisors during her enrollment, and does not anticipate switching again. Her first advisor left the university at the start of her second year, and she was subsequently introduced to her current advisor. She describes her advising experiences as being positive, but initially challenging:

My first advisor was a great professor, but he wasn't a great advisor. So, in the beginning you don't notice it as much, because we're all on equal footing, but later when we were focusing on literature reviews, he said "oh, you guys are doctoral students, go and look at what other schools require of their students." We were like 'we aren't at other schools, we're here at this one.'

That was frustrating for Kimberly, and it was then that she knew that she would need another advisor. She reached out to a professor in the program, and she agreed to take her on as an advisee in her second year of the program. Under the direction of her new advisor, she has excelled. She describes her current advisor as "Amazing"! "She's investing in us, and she is a wife, and does a lot of other things. She is highly communicative, sends us emails, texts, and uses Skype for meetings. She is critical; she's connecting a lot more deeply." Under the direction of her new advisor, she completed her overview and is now working on the remainder of her dissertation. Her three-year plan is on track, and Kimberly is satisfied with her journey, but she has experienced some frustrations along the way. When I asked Kimberly about her experiences with faculty, peers, and other academic opportunities, what she described was

unfortunate, but not uncommon. One incident she recalled was during a class discussion, where another Black female student got into an argument with another student over a racially-charged comment. The other Black woman felt disrespected by the comment and asked the professor to address the comment; however, she did not. The woman, feeling defenseless and disrespected, left the class and subsequently the program.

She felt violated as a Black woman, and it was hard to see and it was shared amongst all the other Black women of color, and men of color in the class. And I was kind of upset at the moment, but it was toward the end of the semester so I had to stay strong and finish. I think after that our cohort was a lot more sensitive to race, and you know how you show up and give space in allowing people to talk, and be present, and speak their truth.

This incident left Kimberly feeling helpless, unprotected and “silenced” as a Black woman in her program. It made her more conscious about what she said and shared in a public forum, such as in class. This was one situation where she identified race as impacting her experience in her program. However, due to her prior experience in higher education and dealing with life as a Black woman at a PWI, she could tuck her feelings away and push forward.

Her experiences with the other faculty members have been mostly positive and, being a member of a cohort, helpful in allowing the students to have “continuity with the professors.” She describes her experiences with the faculty:

There is kinda two levels, the core where you knew you would see them at least once a semester because they were core faculty members, and then there were the kind of ones where they were not adjunct, but kinda popped in on special topics. So, for those,

there was no way to form those deeper connects, seeing them only four times in a semester.”

It also has provided continuity with her peers, especially amongst the other students of color. The students of color in her cohort started communicating using a social network platform called *GROUPME*, where they share information, provide encouragement, and support one another. She admits that she is not comfortable reaching out to people because she is an introvert. Sheila agreed that the members of that group “would be there if I wanted to connect and that just because we formed that kinda informal community past having classes together.” She considers these members her “homies in the program.” While this group has been present and supportive during her doctoral journey, it has not been the only source of support Kimberly has relied on during her doctoral studies. She has several mentors and describes the mentoring she receives as “a la carte mentorship.” She can call on a particular mentor when she needs direction, support, and encouragement. Kimberly also benefited from a counterspace similar to Rachel’s, by connecting with other students of color where she feels a greater sense of belonging. Kimberly also developed and experienced counterspace similar to those Danielle reported through peer and professional mentoring. All Kimberly’s mentors work within higher education, and one is a “white woman from a prior job who helps her to navigate the job market and give her career advice.” Kimberly has also been an active member of her sorority for over fifteen years. She has “increased her participation in the national organization” since beginning her doctoral studies. She talked about what the sorority means to her and described it in these words: “I enjoy the sisterhood moments, and like to do the business of the organization, and keep it balanced, and let my hair down.” Her sorority allows her to feel a sense of purpose and connectedness. When discussing family, Kimberly considers her family as “central” in her

journey, and her mother to be her “biggest cheerleader.” Kimberly felt her family to be important. “Were they a driving force for all my life? No, not like they are now.”

These support systems are critical to Kimberly’s persistence in her program, but when I asked her what she found to be the most instrumental in her persistence she said, “I don’t want to sound selfish in saying this but, myself. I set this goal for myself back in undergrad.” She considers herself an “island” and she feels that despite these support systems:

I think I would have, could have, still done the program. I would not have liked it. I would have did it because it was just something that I started, and I would have to finish it, but I wouldn’t have appreciated it the same. I would not have held my sanity the same. Those people are important for when you have a moment.

This journey is not over for Kimberly, and she will graduate in the coming year. She is glad that she has “stepped outside of my comfort zone,” allowing other people in and trying new things that she had never before considered.

I am used to being an island and I’m understanding the power of the circle. This program has helped me form some relationships with other students of color, and there are a lot of Black women. And this sense of community, support and up-lift, cause I think anything outside of this space people talk about how we tear each other down. not in this program; not with these colleagues that I’ve formed friendships with. We’re all about making sure that people have the resources that they need, and the support that they need.

4.5.1 The Power of the Circle

For Kimberly, there was no singular area that stood out more than another. While Kimberly shared experiences that were similar to the other three women in the study, she also had an experience that was somewhat different. She had more than one advisor; she experienced gendered and racial discrimination; and she also felt misunderstood and isolated. However, Kimberly found support from many areas to help her persist during her pursuit of her doctoral degree. She did not credit one particular person, program or space with her success. She instead credited herself, and her ability to discover the “power of the circle,” compelling her to be able to succeed in her doctoral studies. This was important because it indicates that there are many ways in which counterspace can support Black women in graduate school. Most importantly, it demonstrates the “call” for Black women to recognize the critical need for support on many levels and from various places. BFT teaches us that while Black women share being Black, they do not all share in the same experience, yet together create a collective standpoint.

5.0 LEARNING FROM THE STORIES OF BLACK WOMEN

The women in the study graciously shared their personal experiences of struggle and triumph while pursuing their doctorates. Some have successfully completed their degrees, while others are still on their journey. Sharing the women's stories is important to give a voice to these women who many times felt silenced and misunderstood by their peers, as well as the faculty who are responsible for providing them with guidance and support. The lessons learned from this study are important as a catalyst for potential change, and the development of doctoral programs that are better suited to support Black women. In this section I present underlying themes that were present throughout the women's stories.

5.1 MOTIVATIONS & EXPECTATION OF DOCTORAL STUDY

The women in the study all had different motivations for pursuing doctoral degrees. Rachel and Danielle wanted to pursue careers paths that required doctoral degrees, while Sheila's primary motivation was to find a way to help other Black women pursue their academic goals. Kimberly's motivation was centered on self-care and self-definition, and she pursued her degree as a way to give back to herself what she felt she lost in her prior marriage. There was no common motivation for the women, but they all shared the same expectation prior to enrollment. As the women shared their experiences, each of them described feeling tricked and were all very

surprised at how their experience was different than what they expected. Each of the women had prior experience in graduate school, since each one possessed a master's degree. They each described their experiences while enrolled in those graduate programs. What they described were institutions that were intentional on providing support to students of color, which they all described as lacking in their current experience. Rachel described her prior institution as a PWI that placed an emphasis on all graduate students, and provided support to graduate students through a separate office of graduate studies. Danielle's prior institution also had a separate office of graduate studies, but she also described the campus as more inclusive and one that sought to be diverse in all areas, including the faculty. Sheila attended a Historically Black College/University (HBCU) and described that experience as: "It felt like everyone on campus was in your corner and pushing you toward success." This was very different than her experience once she enrolled in her doctoral program. There, she felt alone and had very little support, especially from the institution. Kimberly's expectations were in line with the other women; she, too, expected to be met with a greater sense of support and responsiveness from the institution based on her prior experience in graduate school. She very quickly found that she needed to navigate the program independently, because the support she expected was not available.

These unmet expectations were the primary reason the women were so drawn to the counterspace in which they ultimately became involved. Feeling alone and unsupported in an environment that felt cold and unfriendly drove the women to seek others who they could find connectedness with, and support from.

5.2 INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

The study demonstrates that institutional support is critical for the success of Black women pursuing the doctorate. The women in the study reported feeling lost, unsupported and unsure of their academic progress due to a lack of adequate institutional support. In this section, I discuss three major areas of institutional support that were determined to be of critical importance for the women in this study.

5.2.1 Impactful Advising

Advising was a major topic of discussion during the interviews, and the women all described contrasting experiences with advising. All women except Danielle had multiple advisors. Rachel and Sheila each had three advisors during their enrollment, and both attributed their protracted enrollment to lack of “proper advisement.” Kimberly had two advisors and reported having a great relationship with her current advisor, feeling “invested in and supported.” Danielle was the only woman who had the same advisor for her entire program, yet she still felt like she was “floating,” and wasn’t sure if she was meeting her milestones to progress. Overall, it was clear that advising was a source of frustration for each of the women at some point during their doctoral studies. Having to start over with new advisors two and three times was difficult for the women, because it prevented them from “forming deeper connections” and having “a sense of connectedness” that they felt was important for them during their doctoral studies.

Their advising experiences were not all negative. While three of the women had multiple advisors, they felt that their final or current advisors were, as Rachel stated, “pivotal in their success.” Kimberly, who had two advisors, said that her first advisor “was a great professor, but

he wasn't a great advisor." However, she described her current advisor using the words "amazing, critical, and highly communicative." Danielle felt her advisor was "emotionally supportive and an ally," and she spoke very highly about their relationship. She felt that she could "count on his support." None of the women had a Black female advisor, which they did not see as an issue, but did feel as though there were some things "they did not understand" because they were not Black. Nonetheless, they did feel that their advisors were making an impact on how they experienced their doctoral programs. Danielle felt that they [Black women] could benefit from having White males as advisors because they [White male advisors] occupied "positions of power." As for White women, the women in the study described their White female advisors as "good for career advice." It was also important to note that the women in the study also felt more comfortable with these advisors because they [the White male and female advisors] also conducted research on topics like race and equality. This helped the women feel comfortable with these advisors because they felt more understood. The participants echoed Collins' (2000) position in that "It is more likely for Black women, as members of an oppressed group, to have critical insights into the condition of our oppression than it is for those who live outside those structures." Three of the women gave their advisors credit for making attempts to "understand issues Black women face," which made them "more comfortable" with their advisors. They felt their advisors were making a conscious effort to understand the plight of the Black woman. Two of the women cited their advisors' research was "race based," so they could connect with them because of similar research interests. As a result, these commonalities helped to build the relationship and improved the experiences for the women.

The women in the study reported that their race was always present, and it was the most impactful part of their identity that influenced their doctoral experiences. Sheila considered race

to be the most influential aspect of her identity, and the other three women in the study agreed that race impacted their experience more than gender. Danielle summed it up by saying “every day you feel it, and no one understands you. You have no sense of belonging and connectedness.” However, she closed by saying “it’s a good thing, because I have never been more focused and aware.” The final advisors for each of the women clearly exhibited characteristics that the women found important, and allowed them to feel more comfortable and successful under their advisement. The findings of the study indicate that advising remains a critical component of the doctoral experience for Black women (Shavers & Moore, 2014). It also indicates that Black women can have successful advising relationships with members of other races and genders, although they feel better understood by other Black women. Finally, it demonstrates that it is important to appropriately match Black women with one advisor to allow them to build trusting and dependable relationships.

5.2.2 The Importance of Same-Race Faculty and Peers

Interactions with faculty and peers are central to every graduate school experience, and it was no less important for the women in this study. The women in this study, especially Sheila, described their interaction with faculty as “varied” and believed that the faculty were supportive and encouraging. Yet, the lack of diversity within the faculty made her feel misunderstood, as if she had to constantly explain who she was as a Black woman with a research agenda focused on race. In addition to the lack of racial diversity amongst the faculty, the women, including Sheila, also observed the faculty as extremely White-male dominated. While, overall, the White male faculty seemed unengaged and uninterested in supporting Black women, two of the women in the study said that they received substantial support and encouragement from the White male

faculty. They counted these faculty members as allies and referred to them as individuals with “positions of power.” This power was helpful in situations where they needed an advocate or assistance in navigating the system, and the women in the study aligned themselves with White male faculty for this purpose. One area they considered lacking was the faculty’s involvement in providing adequate guidance in areas such as topic selection and how to complete scholarly writing.

Sheila’s experience demonstrated the challenges Black women face when dealing with their peers in terms of connectedness and understanding. The women in the study described peer interactions with White students as complicated. While the women understood the importance of peer interactions and group work, the women found themselves in difficult situations, especially in class settings. Racially-charged incidents, such as those that Kimberly and Danielle experienced, left the women feeling disrespected and offended. However, they felt it was better for them to remain silent rather than speak up for fear of the academic and social consequences they may face as a result. While the women remained silent, their consciousness was being raised, which suggests that they were not allowing their experiences to define them or shape what they thought of themselves (Collins, 2000). Danielle expressed this when she said, “it’s a good thing. Because I have never been more focused or aware.” This increased sense of awareness came from her inability to speak up about who she was, but to develop her identity inside. Bonner (1987) describes it as “remaining motionless on the outside...but inside?” The women also felt misunderstood by their peers as it related to their research, and felt like they had to consistently provide additional background or context for their comments or positions because they were Black. They all discussed the lack of “genuine connections” with most of their non-

Black peers, and participated in group activities or study groups as a “requirement from their advisor.”

As a result, the women had to connect with other students of color and find supportive faculty to find a sense of connection and seek direction. Another component of faculty and peer’s interaction is how academic and cultural support is provided for Black women, because it also impacts the graduate school experience.

All the women expressed a lack of adequate academic and cultural support for students of color. Their inability to be understood by their peers, as Sheila discussed, made her feel “frustrated” because she felt no one understood her as a Black woman. Finding necessary resources to assist with, as Kimberly describes, “literature reviews” and “topic selection” was a major point of contention for the women, especially because the entirety of their research was related to race. They considered this lack of academic support one reason for their protracted enrollment and inability to make what they felt was timely progress in their programs.

In addition, as Black women attending a PWI, the women expected their institutions and programs to provide better cultural support for individuals in minoritized groups, such as themselves. They viewed the lack of diversity among the faculty and student body as a critical deficiency in the program’s ability to effectively address the needs of minoritized groups. Because of this lack of diversity, Sheila did not have confidence in the program’s ability to provide support to Black women.

5.2.3 Peer and Professional Mentoring

I expected the women in the study to all have strong academic mentors, but none of the women cited having an academic mentor. All the women did acknowledge mentors as being

instrumental in their success, but none were mentors from within their program. All the women cited mentors outside of their institutions as critical to their progression, and in assisting them with finding academic opportunities, professional networks, and being a source of support and guidance for the women during their doctoral journey. Likewise, Kimberly described the mentoring she received as “a la carte mentorship.” Most salient, was the mentoring Black women received from other students of color. The women all credited other students with providing them with information related to the next steps to progress in their degree, academic support and emotional support during enrollment. The findings of the study suggest that Black women lack adequate academic mentors and often find peer mentors to be helpful, and mentors outside of academia as impactful. One possible reason Black women lack academic mentors is due to the lack of Black women faculty, which may impact Black women’s ability to find and connect with Black women academic mentors. The lack of adequate numbers of Black women faculty is a larger problem that this study did not seek to address. However, research suggests that while Black women are graduating from doctoral programs at an increased rate, the number of Black women faculty has not increased, remaining at approximately one percent (Shavers et al., 2014). There is no clear answer as to why Black women are not represented in higher numbers as faculty. The data suggests they are available, yet they are not entering into faculty positions. Perhaps they are not seeking academic careers or not being considered for positions available. This ultimately creates an issue for Black women graduate students who do not have the opportunity to be mentored by other Black women, resulting in peer mentoring relationships with one another.

5.3 COUNTERSPACE: LESSONS LEARNED

The stories the women in the study shared demonstrate the importance of counterspace for Black women pursuing the doctorate. Critically important are informal counterspace, because formal counterspace neglect issues of race and gender for Black women. Feeling misunderstood because of race and gender was a salient theme throughout the women's stories. To find a better sense of belonging, the women sought out safe places where they could find encouragement and support. Sheila recounted feeling as though no one understood her research agenda because it was centered around students of color, and said that she "had to provide additional context to White students." However, she still never felt understood. Danielle felt as though her fellow classmates "didn't get her or her work" and, as a result, she also felt disconnected from her program and institution.

All the women talked about their introduction to their academic counterspace and each became involved in academic counterspace through differing means. Sheila's and Kimberly's academic counterpace came by way of a study group that was started by students of color in their classes. Kimberly, who is a self-proclaimed introvert, was involved in a study group that was initiated by her advisor, but said she "did not feel genuine connections" with the members of that group and was merely participating "as a way to connect with my advisor." However, when asked to participate in a study group that was started by other students of color, she said she "felt more deeply connected" and "knew they were people she could call if she needed help." For Kimberly, this was difficult, because it required her to step outside of her comfort zone to connect with others, something that typically made her uncomfortable. She was used to being an "island," but she said it was important for her to become a member of the study group because they have been able to provide her with the support and encouragement that she lacked while

enrolled. Sheila's story is similar, and Sheila also credits her study group, which is also comprised of students of color, with providing her "a safe space" to share her identity. The study groups were used by Kimberly and Sheila to provide feedback on their writing, extend their networks, and to provide leads on academic opportunities that were forthcoming.

Danielle and Rachel were not members of a study group; however, they did find solidarity with other students of color whom they labeled either their "academic boos" or "struggle buddies." Danielle and Rachel became members of another kind of academic counterspace that was comprised of women of color, also acting as a sounding board for ideas, editors for writing, support and encouragement during their journey. Danielle and Rachel's academic counterspace was different from Kimberly and Sheila's only because it did not include men. Danielle and Rachel were aligned in their perceptions about intersectionality, and that men of color did not understand what it meant to be a Black woman, or any woman of color. For this reason, they joined an academic counterspace that focused on women of color. The women in the study credit these academic counterspace as the most critical element of their success. "I am used to being an island, and I'm understanding the power of the circle," Kimberly said. The power of the circle is what she needed as a Black woman pursuing a doctorate at a PWI. The women's ability to use counterspace to fill the voids they were experiencing while enrolled in their doctoral programs was inspiring. They each knew what it was they expected, and knew what they needed to be successful. When they could not find it within the formal spaces and structures of the institution, they created it themselves.

The central aim of the study was to understand the academic and non-academic counterspace Black women utilize to promote success in doctoral study. There were additional non-academic counterspace that each of the women experienced during their enrollment in

doctoral study, and each agreed that these additional non-academic counterspace were critical in their success. Those non-academics counterspace were their family and friends.

5.3.1 Family

Family was another major source of strength and support for the women in this study. Connecting with their family on a regular basis was important, and all the women made time to connect with key individuals, such as mothers, fathers, grandparents and children on a regular basis. They were able to provide updates on their progress, and seek support during times of stress and uncertainty. This affirms Collins (2000) concept regarding Black women's involvement in non-academic counterspace to develop and share knowledge. Collins (2000) states that "Black women's centrality in families, churches, and other community organizations provide African-American women with a high degree of support for invoking dialogue as a dimension of Black feminist epistemology." They each considered themselves to be close to their families, at least at the time of the study, and reflected on how essential that support was for them while they were working on their doctorate. Family can also be considered a counterspace, as family is one group that usually knows the individual well and with whom one can be themselves without explanation. Each of the women talked about their family as a counterspace, but none described their family as their primary counterspace.

One drawback they cited was the added pressure that came with the support of family. Each of the women described their family as encouraging and pushing them to complete, but they also each said that their family members did not understand the process of getting a doctorate degree. Because they did not understand the process, it produced added pressure. "By nature of you going to school, everybody is going to school" Rachel stated. Danielle's account

was similar “they don’t get it, like they don’t understand the milestones and what it takes. So, with the support comes the pressure.” Although not all the women were first generation college graduates, they were slated to be the first in their respective families to complete a doctorate degree. The women discussed the pressure that accompanied that pursuit and, while they were proud, they were also feeling scared and anxious due to the pressure that came with this designation.

5.3.2 Friends

The women in this study all mentioned key individuals in their lives that they could call on to be a listening ear, to obtain advice, prayer, for laughter and sometimes to cry. Some were childhood friends, some were friends they made since beginning their doctoral studies, but their friends were noted as important counterspace as they worked to complete their degrees. Rachel and Danielle talked about friends from prior institutions and places of employment, and both said they have frequent contact with their friends who would call to check on them on a regular basis to make sure they were “mentally okay.” In addition, both Rachel and Danielle formed connections with scholars at outside institutions who they communicated with frequently. Sheila who was the only woman in the study who lived in the city where the study was conducted and had friends in multiple places such as work, school, church and other professional organizations. She mentioned those friends as people who would “call her up to pray her through.” Kimberly, who was also from another state, talked about friends at prior institutions and her current place of employment, but she also mentioned, as did all the women in the study, the new friends they made through their academic counterspace they were involved in while in pursuit of their

doctorate. Friendship was important, because it also provided a “safe place” for the women to feel comfortable and connected.

5.4 CHAPTER CONCLUSION

This chapter outlines the graduate school experiences of the women while pursuing their doctorates. The study demonstrated, consistent with the current literature, that Black women can experience graduate school negatively. Yet those negative experiences can be used as ways to develop positive experiences, such as counterspace. These experiences included feeling isolated, misunderstood and without a voice in academic spaces. These experiences often were the stimulus to the development of, or participation in, academic and non-academic counterspace. Furthermore, the study demonstrated the essential nature of academic and non-academic counterspace to Black women’s success while pursuing the doctorate. I discovered that the academic counterspace of Black women are created out of a need to belong and to feel understood due to their race and gender. These counterspace usually happen organically and informally, but are critical in assisting Black women in overcoming the struggles and challenges they face during enrollment. Non-academic counterspace can range in scope from informal networks such as friends and family, to formal networks such as churches and sororities. Nevertheless, all of them are important and provide different but overlapping and interconnecting support for Black women as they pursue doctoral degrees.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of Black women pursuing the doctorate, and the academic and non-academic support systems that assist them while enrolled in doctoral study. The experiences of the four women in the study were consistent with the current literature that suggests that Black women experience graduate school differently due to their dually oppressed status as Black women. The study further demonstrates the importance of informal counterspace for Black women in graduate school, because the existing formal spaces do not consider the issues of race and gender that Black women face in graduate school. In this Chapter, I discuss how these findings could be used to address the practices currently in place in graduate schools. This will allow Black women feel a greater sense of connection, acceptance, and support. Lastly, I discuss how this study can inform future research and how this research can be extended into other areas.

6.1 THE IMPORTANCE OF ADVISING AND FACULTY DIVERSITY

All the women in the study had issues with advising at some point during their enrollment, yet all of their advising experiences were not negative. Finding the right advisor was most important for each of the women. Having multiple advisors during their enrollment proved to be a challenge initially; however, once the women found advisors who were a better fit they

began to have positive advising experiences. Having advisors that provided clear structure, guidance, set expectations, and made deliberate efforts to connect with the women, was cited as critical in building positive advising relationships. Literature on advising suggests that strong advising relationships make students feel more connected to their programs and, in turn, also increase productivity (Aryan et al., 2010, Gildersleeve, et al., 2011).

It was clear from the study that advising was a central theme, and the role of the advisor was one that the women in the study deemed critical to their success or lack thereof. The women in the study all reported feeling disconnected, misunderstood, and unclear on the requirements for program completion. The women could find advisors that assisted them in making progress to complete their degrees, but finding advisors that were supportive, invested, and who made the women comfortable was a serious challenge. Three of the women credited new female faculty of color with making the difference in their degree progression and completion. The shortage of Black female faculty creates a lack of Black female faculty to advise Black women graduate students. As a result, Black women are placed at a significant disadvantage due to this shortage of Black women faculty who are available to provide advising (Ellis, 2001; Moses, 1989; Patton & Harper, 2003; Schwartz, Bower, Rice, & Washington, 2003; Thomas, Willis & Davis, 2007). The women in the study would have benefited from having a more diverse faculty to provide advising early on in their graduate school experience. Providing additional opportunities for these women to be advised by a diverse faculty would have had a large impact on how the women experienced graduate studies, including advising.

6.2 RACE AND GENDER MATTER

The women in the study indicated that their race and gender were central to how they experienced their doctoral programs. While they each said that race was the most influential of the two, they cited that gender did play a role in their experience. As Black women, they reported feeling misunderstood, even by Black men. All the women in the study gave examples of ways they felt misunderstood by their peers and the faculty. It was one of the main reasons that counterspace were so vital to the women, because they provided them with a place where they did not have to explain themselves and their race-centered research agendas. Two of the women reported feeling misunderstood by Black men, which was not surprising, when using BFT as a lens for evaluation. However, it is a concern that higher education should consider, because Black women and Black men share some collective experience. However, the intersectionality that Black women face places them into a unique position. They attributed this to the Black man's status as a male, and their lack of understand of what it meant to be a member of a dually-oppressed group. This lack of understanding of Black women's positionality by Black men made some of the women feel anger and resentment against those Black men and, as a result, they looked for support from other women of color. While they expected to share similar experiences with Black men and, therefore, demonstrate an understanding for one another, the experiences of the Black women in the study suggest otherwise. Collins (2000) argues that while there are "relational group histories" that "coalitions with some groups are not always possible" (p. 247). The women in the study reported that while "group experiences are interdependent, they are not equivalent" (Collins, 2000 p. 247). Likewise, the women, while sharing similar group experiences with White women, and being members of that oppressed group as women, were also unable to always find a sense of connectedness with White women. White women did

not understand what it meant to be Black. This placed the women in an uncomfortable position, as Collins (2000) defined as “outsiders-within.” While they were members of the group of doctoral students, they never received full membership to the group due to their status as Black women. What this demonstrates is that Black women’s experiences in graduate school is influenced by both race and gender; however, race is still the most prominent of the two.

6.3 COUNTERSPACE ARE IMPERATIVE

Counterspace are not a new phenomenon. Counterspace for Black women have existed in various formats, developed out of the complex needs of Black who have found themselves as outsiders within mainstream society. The findings of the study show that counterspace, both academic and non-academic, are imperative for Black women pursuing doctoral degrees. Collins (2000) states that “Black women have been taught to possess the spirit of independence” and self-sufficiency, but this study reveals that Black women pursuing the doctorate who lack safe spaces, and other people they can rely on, have poor graduate school experiences. Collins (2000) posits that “Black women develop deeper and more meaningful definitions of themselves when they are connected to one another. Each of the women in the study reported feeling alone, isolated, and misunderstood, which is consistent with the current literature (Aryan et al., 2010; Ellis, 2001; Moses, 1989; Shavers et al., 2014). These feelings persisted for the women in the study until they found a support network in which to connect. All the women in the study were involved in a counterspace of some kind. Most commonly, their counterspace were developed organically out of the mutual need for connectedness and inclusion, and evolved over time and in scope. In most cases, Black women are creating counterspace out of the resources available at

the time. Meaning, Black women, along with other students of color, are bannin together and becoming allies in an effort to survive their situations. Clayborne and Hamrick (2007) suggest that Black women are more likely to find support outside of the formal structures of work and school, and instead seek support from religious groups and other Black women. Because Black women experience graduate school in this manner, they are often forced to look for counterspace where they can feel understood, supported and successful (Aryan et al., 2010; Ellis, 2001; Grant et al., 2013; Patton, 2009). “The right to be Black *and* female *and* respected pervades everyday conversations among African-American women” (Collins, 2009, p. 126). Safe spaces for Black women continue to be non-existent within academia, and prevent Black women from getting to truly know themselves as academics within institutions of higher education. Continued reliance on themselves and other Black women for support and guidance continues to place Black women in the margins within our institutions of higher education. “This inherited tradition of activism and their unwavering support for each other operate as emotional safe spaces that enable them to withstand the discrimination and discouragement that they experience as doctoral students” (Ross & Marina, 2016, p. 294). Pursing a doctorate degree can be stressful by its own merit; adding the additional challenges Black women face due to their dually oppressed status can further complicate their experience, which has been shown to impact retention (Grant et al., 2013; Moses, 1989). Counterspace is a demonstrated mechanism by which Black women successfully complete doctoral degrees.

6.4 IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

There continues to be a lack of knowledge about the experiences of Black women in graduate school (Grant et al., 2008; Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017; Shavers & Moore, 2014). This study contributes to the body of knowledge, and expands upon what is currently known as it relates to the ways in which Black women experience graduate school. The several prominent implications of this study are the significance of advising, race and gender matters, the value of faculty and student diversity, and the importance of counterspace as a tool for success for Black women pursuing a doctorate. Finally, the study also contributes to Black Feminist Thought, as it contributes to the knowledge about Black women.

First, this study demonstrates the significant role the advisor plays in the completion of a doctoral degree, especially for a Black woman. Advising is arguably one of the most important components of the graduate school experience, as advisors are the students' first line of support, encouragement and assistance in navigating the doctoral experience. The women in the study all had issues surrounding advising, and all but one had more than one advisor during their enrollment. As a result, the women felt lost, uncertain of their progress, and disconnected from their programs. Three of the women found themselves floundering in meeting their program goals and were in their programs longer than they expected. They attributed this to their lack of adequate advising. Advising is critical to the graduate school process and the advisor should be thought of as the "face" of the program, or the liaison between the graduate student and the institutional structure. Institutions need to do a better job of evaluating the quality of advising, especially to students such as Black women who experience graduate school differently than their counterparts (Weidman et al., 2001). One way that institutions can improve experiences related to advising is to incorporate advising into the faculty evaluation process. Additionally,

students should complete evaluation surveys to determine the effectiveness of the advisor. Finally, institutions should evaluate the diversity of their faculty, and purposefully seek to hire additional faculty of color to aid in the advisement of the students of color. The existing data, along with this study, provide numerous areas of improvement for institutions to better support Black women in graduate school.

Secondly, the study confirms that being Black *and* a woman matters, or that race and gender are still important. Because Black women experience graduate school in a different capacity, it is important to understand how the intersection of race and gender impact their graduate school experience. The women in the study all cited race as the most prominent of the two, as it related to their experience; however, they also reported gender as a factor. As Black women are members of a dually-oppressed group, it is important for institutions of higher education, and the faculty and administration within, to recognize their specific issues and needs as they relate to this dual oppression. As previously stated, institutions can begin by hiring additional faculty and staff of color to provide additional support and insight into the issues faced by Black women. Hiring individuals such as diversity officers, who understand issues such as intersectionality, is a step in the right direction to help institutions understand where deficiencies exist. Black women also need to recognize their positionality with this dually-oppressed group, and to seek support and resources early to prevent themselves from becoming disconnected and leaving their programs. The women in the study had a greater sense of self-awareness and consciousness because of their experiences with race and gender while enrolled in their doctoral programs. This increased awareness allowed the women to be cognizant of their needs and to assert them when necessary.

Thirdly, this study's most notable implication was the importance of counterspace for Black women pursuing doctorates. The study also contributes to the greater understanding of how Black women utilize counterspace to their advantage to complete their graduate degrees. Counterspace have been shown to be a reliable and successful tool used by Black women in the completion of doctoral degrees. Various types of counterspace have been identified which suggests that counterspace are not one-size-fits-all; the success of the counterspace is largely dependent on the individuals who create and occupy it. The finding of the study suggests that counterspace is as important for Black women's success in doctoral programs as other aspects of the graduate school experience, such as advising, peer and faculty interaction, and programs structure. Institutions that desire to truly make impactful and lasting change must first acknowledge that an opportunity for improvement exists. By utilizing the same framework used to conduct research, institutions can identify the issue, research the existing literature or experiences of its membership, develop a strategy for evaluation, interpret the data, and develop a plan of implementation. This would require institutions to take an introspective look into their institutional culture, practices, and policies to reveal the underlying philosophies that support their current structures. In doing so, they will identify areas of underrepresentation in race, gender and other areas. Once this has been accomplished, the expectation would be an increased level of diversity among the faculty, staff and student body. The result would be improved support for Black women and other people of color in graduate school. This would also demonstrate support for counterspace, because it would reduce the need for Black women to seek support outside of the academy. Black women in the study all reported at least one type of counterspace being a central source of support for their success while enrolled in their doctoral program. However, they also noted that in their prior institutions, which were also PWI's, that

they did feel supported because there were structures in place that accounted for gendered and racial differences experienced by Black women. The existing literature focuses on the negative experiences of Black women, while the positive and powerful experiences are often overlooked and disregarded.

As institutions become aware of these negative experiences, they can better plan, prepare, and provide faculty with resources to support the success of Black women in graduate school (Joseph, 2012). As diversity and inclusion agendas of universities become more focused, it is important for institutional leadership to consider the experiences of Black women during graduate school to better understand why Black women are having such difficulty finding adequate support on campus. If the graduate school experiences of Black women are strengthened and enhanced, Black women may begin to see space for themselves within the academy, begin to feel more secure in their doctoral programs, and have more confidence in their institutions. Black women are a valuable and untapped resource for institutions. Their experiences, both personal and professional, can impact higher education in a deep and meaningful way if we can create spaces for them to see themselves. Understanding how Black women experience graduate school and how these experiences have contributed to the development of counterspace is vital. Individuals able to impact those experiences by evaluating and improving programming and other aspects of the graduate school experience hold the key to higher success rates for Black woman seeking graduate degrees. Because not all Black women share the same experience, it is critical to understand those individual experiences as well as their collective standpoint.

6.5 IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

This study was developed to further examine and highlight the positive experiences that Black women are having in graduate school. This study sought to build on the positive experiences of Black women in graduate school reported in the literature, and to change the conversation about the experiences of Black women in graduate school from a deficit perspective toward an anti-deficit perspective (Harper, 2010). Sharing the positive experiences of Black women in graduate school through their involvement in counterspace provides a new perspective on how Black women create positive experiences while situated in negatively charged environments.

As more Black women continue to enter graduate school, a fundamental understanding of how other Black women have experienced doctoral studies can better prepare Black women who desire to pursue a doctorate degree for the experiences they may face during enrollment. (Hannon et al., 2016). This understanding can help increase Black women's awareness of their areas of vulnerability and provide them with a new sense of consciousness, so they can advocate for themselves and request assistance and services early (Hannon et al., 2016). This shared experience of Black women who have encountered a raised sense of awareness and consciousness through their experiences will add to the body of knowledge about what is known about Black women's experiences in doctoral studies. This is a key tenant of Black Feminist Thought, which challenges Black women scholars to find ways to advance BFT. Because BFT is produced by Black women, dissemination of BFT is a necessity for Black women scholars. Black women scholars understand the collective standpoint of Black women, and can relate to the position and conditions Black women encounter. Black women within the academy have a unique opportunity to combine scholarship and activism to impact social justice and to further

BFT (Collins, 2000). This collective standpoint and understanding can empower Black women to seek necessary resources for support both within the academy and outside. It is the collective standpoint, that Collins (2000) says is “essential to U.S. Black women’s survival” (p.98).

This work contributes to Black feminist thinking and provides additional insight into the minds and thoughts of Black women as it contributes to the existing literature about Black women, by Black women. It further extends Black Feminist Thought that argues that Black Feminist Thought can only be created by Black women, because only Black women know what it is to be a Black woman. This study provides insight into Black women’s way of knowing their individual experiences from their collective standpoint. While each woman in the study had experiences that were distinct, the women shared a collective standpoint as Black women who utilized counterspace to promote their success while pursuing their doctorate. BFT argues that Black women experiences can be shared through a collective standpoint, although no two Black women have identical experiences. As a Black woman scholar, Collins (2000) challenges me to extend the dialogue about Black women so we can not only define ourselves, but also define our experiences. Creating our own self-definition allows Black women to resist the oppressive and negative mainstream stereotypes and imagery presented about Black women, and instead offer a counter narrative that represents Black women in a positive and respectable manner. Based on the findings of this study, additional research can be conducted on related topics.

6.6 FUTURE RESEARCH

The number of potential research topics that could be done to further the findings from this study are extensive. A few studies that would build upon the findings on this study could

include, but are not limited to, a quantitative study on the graduation success rates amongst Black women graduating from traditional doctoral programs versus cohort based doctoral programs. A study of this nature would help to determine if the graduation rates are better for Black women in traditional doctoral programs or cohort based doctoral programs. This type of study would shed additional light on the importance of program structure and its impact on retention rates. A qualitative study to evaluate the experiences of Black women enrolled in cohort based doctoral programs could be completed to evaluate if the experiences of Black women enrolled in cohort based doctoral programs are different than what is reported in the current literature. This would also provide additional information about program structure and its impacts on Black women's experiences. Another potential study could be an ethnographic study where Black woman who are involved in counterspace agree to be followed to evaluate what aspects of academic and non-academic counterspace are most essential for Black women. This type of study would provide information on how academic counterspace are formed, and how Black women utilize academic and non-academic counterspace to help them to persist through doctoral programs. Finally, qualitative studies that examine the experiences of Black women in graduate school and how their experiences influence their decision to pursue faculty careers would assist in understanding how graduate school experience impacts career decisions. The shortage of Black female faculty continues to be a serious issue, and a study like this could help to determine the linkage between graduate school experience and how Black women make decisions on academic careers. These types of studies will provide more data on the experiences of Black women in graduate school.

6.7 CHAPTER CONCLUSION

Black women are pursuing doctorate degrees at an increased rate, yet they are reportedly one of the most dissatisfied groups on campus (Shavers & Moore, 2014). However, this has not prevented Black women from successfully completing doctoral degrees. Black women have developed and participated in counterspace as a tool to provide support, encouragement and connectedness while enrolled. As the composition of the student body becomes more diverse, and Black women move from being the exception to the norm within graduate programs, it is imperative that institutions of higher education embrace Black women's ways of knowing. As institutions of higher education focus on their diversity agendas, it is imperative that they bring Black women into the conversation so Black women can describe first-hand their needs.

The study title "Count-our-Space" was developed strategically, as a play on the word counterspace, because counterspace is a space that has not been fully considered as essential or valid. The purpose of this study was to draw attention to the experiences of Black women pursuing the doctorate and the role counterspace play in helping Black women be successful. The term counterspace implies that the space is a marginalized space, used by marginalized individuals, and it is; however, this does not have to be the case. Counterspace will always be important and essential, but the way they are viewed can be shaped, partly based on the findings of this study.

Furthermore, this study has provided insight into some of the experiences Black women encounter while pursuing doctorate degrees. It also has contributed to the body of knowledge on the resources Black women use to support themselves throughout doctoral study. These counterspace, both academic and non-academic, are critical components of Black women's support while pursuing doctoral degrees. This study has provided institutions with a

fundamental understanding regarding counterspace, and how Black women develop and become involved in counterspace. These counterspace provide Black women with the support to remain resilient and to persevere despite the many challenges they face as members of a dually-oppressed group during enrollment in doctoral programs. While much of the literature on Black women's experiences is negative, Black women have found ways to thrive. The findings of this study reveal how Black women develop and participate in counterspace to cultivate positive self-definition, self-valuation, and to provide empowerment to each other (Collins, 2000). For those institutions concerned about the success of Black women pursuing the doctorate, we must "learn the power of the circle" so that we can find ways to connect Black women to a circle and ensure their continued success. The completion of this study is a hopeful step in the right direction.

APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANT INVITATION LETTER

Subject: Invitation to Participate in a Research Study About Your Experiences as a Graduate Student.

My name is Christine McClure and I am a doctoral student in the School of Education at the University of Pittsburgh. I am currently conducting research about the experiences of Black women in graduate school and I would like to gain insight from other Black women in graduate school to better understand how their experiences contribute to the development of networks within higher education and other places outside of higher education where they seek support and encouragement. You have received this email because you have been identified as a Black woman enrolled in a doctoral program who may be able to provide a unique perspective and relevant information on how Black women experience doctoral study. The information will be used to determine how Black women experience different aspects of doctoral study including: advising, mentoring, peer interaction, interactions in academic and non-academic spaces, research and professional development opportunities. The University of Pittsburgh Human Research Protections Office has provided an exempt approval for this study.

The study will be conducted first through a simple one-page Inclusion Criteria Survey to determine your eligibility for the study. If you are eligible a short one-page demographic survey and three 60-90-minute in-depth interviews will be conducted. If you are willing to participate, the interview will include questions about background (e.g., age, race, years of education, family background), as well as about your feelings as they relate to your experience in doctoral study. There are no foreseeable risks associated with this project. One potential benefit of the study is that you will be able to talk with someone about your experience. Pseudonyms will be used to blind all interviews. All responses are confidential. Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from this project at any time.

The findings from this study will be used to assist student affairs professionals, faculty and institutional leadership in understanding the differences in how Black women experience doctoral study.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and sessions will be conducted with the Principal Investigator of the study.

For questions or to participate, please contact Christine McClure at 412-624-7098 or chrisera@pitt.edu. You may also contact the research mentor overseeing the project:

Gina Garcia, PhD
School of Education
5709 W. Wesley Posvar Hall
Pittsburgh, PA 15261
ggarcia@pitt.edu

Thank you for your consideration to participate in this study.

APPENDIX B

INCLUSION CRITERIA SURVEY

Name:

Contact

Information:

-
1. What is your racial identity?
 2. What is your gender identity?
 3. Are you currently enrolled in a doctoral program? Yes___ No___
 - a. If yes, what is your discipline? _____
 - b. If no, did you graduate already? Yes___ No___
 - c. If you graduated, when did you graduate? _____
 4. Do you use (or have you used) any of the following resources for support during doctoral study (check all that apply):
 - a. Faculty
 - b. Peers-in graduate school
 - c. Friends-not enrolled in graduate school
 - d. Family
 - e. Mentors-inside or outside of graduate school
 - f. Study groups
 - g. Other (please describe) _____
 5. Are you a member of any of the following (check all that apply)?
 - a. Sorority
 - b. Church
 - c. Community organizations
 - d. Athletic clubs
 - e. Book clubs
 - f. Other (please describe) _____

APPENDIX C

DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Experiences of Black Women Pursuing the Doctorate: Student Participant

Information

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. All responses will be kept confidential and your identity will remain private. Your responses to these questions are *optional* but will be helpful in reporting findings.

1. Name: _____ Birth date: ____/____/____

2. Preferred name (pick a name different from your own):

3. Preferred method of communication (check/complete all that apply):

Cell (text/call): _____ E-mail: _____

4. Marital Status: Single Married Divorced Decline to State

5. Do you have children? Yes No Decline to State

If so what are their ages? _____ Decline to State

6. Are you employed? Yes No Decline to State If yes: Part-time Full-time

7. Are you the first in your family to attend graduate school? Yes No Decline to State

8. Did they graduate? Yes No Decline to State

9. In what doctoral program are you enrolled?

10. What is your discipline?

11. To verify validity, would you be willing to review preliminary results from this study? Yes No (if you are not, it will not exclude your participation in the study)

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview #1: Tell me about your trajectory into doctoral studies, starting with your earliest memory.

Probes:

1. Where did you attend college?
2. What kinds of activities did you participate in during college?
3. What role did your parents play in your college experience?
4. Why did you decide to pursue a doctorate?

Interview #2: General Doctoral/Graduate School Experiences

1. Talk to me about your experience in graduate school. What has it been like?
2. **Probes:** advising; mentoring; interactions in the classroom; etc.
3. Talk to me about your experience with your advisor.
4. Talk to me about your experience with your peers.
5. Talk to me about your experience with faculty.
6. Talk to me about your experience regarding academic opportunities such as research, publication and grant writing.
7. If you could change anything about your doctoral school experience, what would it be?

Interview #2: Experiences as a Black Woman Doctoral Student

1. Talk to me about your experience with race in doctoral studies.
2. Talk to me about your experience with gender in doctoral studies.
3. Talk to me about your experience with both gender and race in doctoral studies.
4. Talk to me about how you feel your race influences your experience as a doctoral student.
5. Talk to me about how you feel your gender influences your experience as a doctoral student.

6. Talk to me about how you feel your race and gender together influence your experience as a doctoral student.
7. If you had to pick one, race or gender, which do you feel has been more influential on your experience as a doctoral student and why?

Interview #2: Experiences with Counterspace

1. Talk to me about who you would consider your mentors to be, if you have any mentors.
(**Probes:** within higher education; outside of higher education)
2. Talk to me about your involvement in any *formal* groups *on or off* campus.
3. **Probes:** Sororities, athletic programs, employment programs
4. Talk to me about your involvement in any *informal* groups *on or off* campus.
5. **Probes:** Church groups, exercise groups, book clubs, other community organizations
6. What or who would you say has been instrumental in your persistence in your doctoral program?
7. What actions do you take to cope while in doctoral studies?
If supportive people and places did not exist, how do you think it would have affected your experience?

APPENDIX E

PLAN FOR DATA ANALYSIS

1. Transcribe interview audio recordings
2. Complete narrative smoothing of the data
3. Read and re-read the transcripts to become familiar with the data
4. Establish profiles for each participant which include the following:
 - a. Inclusion Criteria Survey Information
 - b. Demographic Survey Information
5. Create vignettes from the interview transcripts to include the following based on Mishler (1995) model:
 - a. Abstract: a summary of the story to include all its major points;
 - b. Orientation: establishes the context, including the place and time;
 - c. Complicating Action: an outline of the story, including the plot and an issue to address;
 - d. Evaluation: my comments to position the story;
 - e. Result or Resolution: resolution to the problem;
 - f. Coda: bringing myself and the participant back together to co-construct the story.
6. Code the interview transcripts deductively, looking for the following:
 - a. Academic Counterspace

- b. Non-Academic Counterspace
 - c. Other significant themes
7. Develop the code book from the coding

Develop the discussion to make meaning of the data from the interviews, and significant codes identified

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